

THE AGONY OF DEMOCRACY:
ANTAGONISM AND URBAN LIFE IN THE AMERICAN REALIST NOVEL

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Abstract

“The Agony of Democracy: Antagonism and Urban Life in the American Realist Novel” argues that American literary realism’s claim to being “democracy in literature” (to use William Dean Howells’s phrase) is linked to the antagonistic reality of cities along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States between 1865 and 1920. In chapters on Howells, Henry James, Abraham Cahan, Edith Wharton, and Charles Chesnutt, “The Agony of Democracy” upends a pervasive literary-critical stereotype suggesting that these authors disdain the democratic crowds and spaces of American cities and that the realist novel ignores or ideologically contains urban-industrial strife. “The Agony of Democracy” shows, on the contrary, that antagonistic us-versus-them relations inflected everyday life and realist writing between the end of the Civil War and the dawn of women’s suffrage, when the U.S. became predominantly urban and nominally more democratic.

The novels in this study place antagonisms of class, race, and gender at the center of their representations of the urban everyday, redefining the tradition of literary realism. To begin with, the release of destructive energy when an antagonism spills into the streets unsettles the realist conventions of plot and narration. In response, Howells, James, Cahan, Wharton, and Chesnutt harness the destructive aesthetic and political energy of urban antagonisms by transforming them into agonistic dialogue between characters and the political positions they represent. In the process, these authors find new ways to make subordinated bodies/voices be seen and heard as debating equals by both other characters and their readers. These American realists thus anticipate contemporary political philosophers such as Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, who valorize dissent and conflict rather than consensus in liberal-democratic society. The result is a consideration of American realists as public philosophers of democracy and antagonism for an urban age,

writers whose lessons are as relevant today as they were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

First Reader: Eric Sundquist

Second Reader: Jared Hickman

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Introduction

The Missing Hand and the Crowded Bar:

American Literary Realism at the Intersection of Urbanism, Antagonism, and Democracy

In 1860, twenty-three-year-old William Dean Howells, an Ohio transplant who had just started to make a name for himself in Boston's literary scene, travelled to New York City to meet some of the city's representative writers. It was something of an "anticlimax" for him (Cady, *Road* 85): he was still overawed by the genteel, if socially awkward, literary giants of New England (James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James T. Fields) and found the Bohemian pretenses of New York's hack-writers (namely a newspaperman named Henry Clapp) extremely tiresome. One August night, Clapp took Howells to Pfaff's beer cellar on Broadway, a "fragrant temple of tobacco smoke, lager beer, Rhine wine, wurst and sauerkraut" (J. Kaplan 245), where Walt Whitman was holding court with a band of Bohemian followers. Howells felt awkward: his lukewarm review of *Leaves of Grass* had recently been published in New York's *Saturday Press*, where Clapp had incorrectly identified the relatively unknown Howells as an Indiana "Hoosier" instead of an Ohio Buckeye.¹

Whitman and Howells met in the middle of the bar and shook hands. "[T]he dignity and spiritual power of Whitman," Howells's biographer writes, "became a permanent memory for Howells, though nothing ever persuaded him to give unqualified approval to Walt's poetry" (Cady, *Road* 85). Indeed, Edward Cutler has tracked Howells's later reviews of Whitman, written when Howells had become the country's preeminent literary critic, and found that the so-called Dean of American Letters was consistently ambivalent about Whitman's poetry. Howells's praise was usually qualified and his critique roughly similar: he

¹ See Cutler 132-133.

did not object to its sexual frankness but found Whitman's poetry bloated, unconstrained, and lacking in aesthetic unity.² In essence, Howells faults Whitman for not writing realist novels. Realism, in Howells's estimation, is "narrow," which is "a virtue. Indeed, we should call the present American work, North and South, thorough, rather than narrow"; after all, "each man is a microcosm, and the writer who is able to acquaint us intimately with half a dozen people, or the conditions of a neighborhood or a class, has done something which cannot in any bad sense be called narrow; his breadth is vertical instead of lateral, that is all" (*Selected* 63). In direct contrast is Whitman's poetry, which is fit for the horizontal vastness of America with its imperial first-person pronoun, free verse, endless catalogues of types and professions, and the incorporation of more materials over time.

Despite these very real formal differences, Howells would go on, in the same vein as Whitman, to argue that literature could help deepen American democracy after the Civil War. Indeed, John Burroughs, a Whitman acolyte, would write an article on "Mr. Howells's Agreements with Whitman" in 1892. Whitman and Howells, he shows, both train their eyes on everyday life rather than transposing readers back in time and place like the pre-modern landscapes of Romantic fiction. "Mr. Howells is preaching the Whitman gospel," Burroughs writes, "when he says, the true realist 'cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than a scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities in which alone the truth lives'" (86).³ As Fredric Jameson notes, the "everyday" in literature is tied to the modern city,⁴ and thus a further comparison of Whitman and Howells

² See Cutler 133.

³ See Howells, *Selected* 302. I discuss this Howells quote in more detail in chapter 1.

⁴ See Jameson, *Antinomies* 146.

might focus on their leveraging of everyday urbanism for the aesthetic and political purpose of creating what they both thought of as “democracy in literature” (Howells, *Selected* 62).



THE MEETING WITH WHITMAN

Figure 1: “The Meeting with Whitman”

Source: Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, p. 74

There is a prevailing literary-critical stereotype, however, that has only sharpened the differences between these two figures on the subject of urban democracy, with Howells typically coming out on the less flattering end. The stereotype can be traced back to the drawing accompanying Howells’s description of their encounter in *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900): Whitman leans back easily in his chair, democratically at home in this

dingy, smoky bar, while Howells stands and bows slightly with his hat at his side, helplessly formal and generally a fish out of water (see fig. 1). If their shared aesthetico-political project links everyday life and democracy, then here, in this instance of everyday urbanism, we notice differences: Whitman is the poet of the urban crowd, perfectly at home in the smells, sounds, and tastes of city life, while Howells stands aloof, prudish and uncertain.

In her otherwise compelling study of nineteenth-century urban culture, Mary Ryan falls prey to this stereotype of Howells and how he compares to Whitman:

Many educated commentators showed . . . symptoms of being ill at ease in public spaces, among them William Dean Howells, who made a literary excursion [to New York City] in 1871. “The Wedding Journey” [*sic*] recounts the tour of Basil and Isabel March, commencing with the familiar promenade down the old artery of the republic, Broadway. Some familiar literary devices can be found along the route: like the diurnal schedule of occupying the thoroughfare, beginning with the early morning cordons of working men followed by businessmen and shop girls, then finally the late-sleeping fashionable ladies. And from the mouth of Basil March came some venerable notices of urban attractions, especially the “Niagara of people” that “transformed a shabby stretch of pavement into a stunning spectacle.” To his bride, however, . . . [t]he passage down Broadway to refuge in the hotel became a disagreeable obstacle course. . . . The reputation of the city seemed to have decayed considerably since the days Lydia Maria Child and Walt Whitman walked so happily down Broadway. [For] [t]he Marches . . . New York was just one rather unpleasant memory, buried in the exquisitely private communication between husband, wife, and reader. Writers such as Howells had not deserted the city, but they began, even before 1880, to divert the literary imagination away from symbols of democratic association and toward a landscape of intimacy. (212-213)

Their Wedding Journey (1871), Howells’s autobiographical novel based on his honeymoon in New York (City and State), is replete with instances of everyday urbanism, as Ryan’s account demonstrates. Howells, though, becomes a stand-in not only for the anti-urbanism of American literary realists (Henry James is soon named as an author “such as Howells”) but for an entire movement in American culture away from the pluralistic face-to-face sociality of antebellum urbanism. Now, there is “a barricade around middle-class privacy” (213). Howells and the realists, Ryan suggests, at least “had not deserted the city,” though they implicitly loathe every minute they spend outside their bourgeois cocoons (213).

Even those who study realism more closely than Ryan, who is an urban historian, conform to this stereotype. Amy Kaplan, Daniel Borus, Nancy Glazener, and Christophe Den Tandt, for example, note the inextricable link between the city and realism but focus on the realists' dismissive stance toward urban publishers, with their anonymous mass of readers, and city spaces more generally. "The city has long been viewed as both the setting and the subject of American realistic fiction at the turn of the century," Kaplan writes (44). Kaplan and Borus include under the "realist" heading authors like Howells, James, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane. I follow Glazener and Den Tandt in making a distinction between the realism of Howells, James, and Wharton—the subjects of this study, along with Abraham Cahan and Charles Chesnutt—and the naturalism of Dreiser, London, Norris, and Crane, against whom the charges of elitism and anti-urbanism have failed to stick, at least by comparison. Glazener shows how Boston's *Atlantic Monthly*, where Howells ascended to editor-in-chief in 1871, established cultural hegemony for the "institution" of "high realism" as well as the northeast urban bourgeoisie after the Civil War. At century's end, these cultural elites found themselves in a losing battle for readership with more popular genres—muckraking novels, naturalism, the sensation novel, and romance. Borus also studies this *fin de siècle* moment, when Howells and others reconfigured the "work" of the realist author as distinct from those Fifth Avenue publishers who pandered to readers. Kaplan argues that realism attempted to construct a unified world in the face of an un-representable urbanism defined by class conflict and mass urban readership.⁵ Den Tandt follows Kaplan's influential argument, describing the realists' positivistic "focu[s] on the visible logic of the social world," which only extends as far as "the family, the workplace, the neighborhood" (17). Any textual "slippages" into the register

⁵ See Glazener 20-50; and Borus 27-64, 77-90. I discuss Kaplan's position throughout this introduction.

of “the urban sublime”—the more violent, shadowy elements of city life that confound the contained, knowable world of bourgeois domesticity—move realist texts into the generic mode of naturalism (18, 24). Though Den Tandt claims that “neither realist nor naturalist discourse exists in isolation, texts that are predominantly realist tend to be more homogeneous than their naturalist counterparts” (17).

These critics suggest that realist authors were bourgeois elites who looked on with ambivalence if not disdain at the democratic processes of mass market publication and consumption, which were of a piece with all the vagaries of urban-industrial life. They feed the stereotype that the realists took refuge inside their homes or in their work to protect themselves from “the terror of urban life” (Den Tandt 23). If we return to our beginning scene, the meeting between Howells and Whitman in 1860, their assessment appears to be correct. Not only is Howells ill at ease in the smoky bar, he distances himself from hacks like Clapp and the democratic, self-publishing Whitman. However, we need to look beyond that moment, to the developments of urban democracy and the realist novel *after* the Civil War.

“The decades following the war,” Alan Trachtenberg writes, “witnessed a major acceleration, striking many contemporaries as a radical departure. In these years, American society decisively crossed the threshold of modern urban culture” (115). Carl Smith provides the corresponding statistics:

Between 1870 and 1900, the number of places classified by the census as cities (i.e., having 2,500 or more inhabitants) went from 663 to 1,737, while the population of such places more than tripled, from just under ten million to over thirty million. In 1870 there were fourteen cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants; by the turn of the century there were thirty-eight, including fifteen with at least a quarter of a million. (*Urban Disorder* 5)

This was also a time of great labor agitation and racial/ethnic violence in American cities. In New York City in 1870 and again in 1871, Irish Protestants clashed with working-class Irish Catholics as the former paraded through the latter’s neighborhoods, leaving eight

dead and hundreds wounded.⁶ Across the continent, in the fledgling frontier city of Los Angeles, a mob of 500 men attacked and lynched the Chinese residents of Chinatown on October 24, 1871, following the death of a white man who had intervened in a police shootout with local gangs.⁷ The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 produced local skirmishes between agitated crowds and U.S. troops in various towns and cities across the country. “In the towns,” Robert Wiebe writes, “people expressed a rather orderly hostility to the roads. But in the cities crowds gathered and milled, clashed with trigger-happy vigilantes and militia, then drifted downtown to riot and loot” (10). Chicago’s Haymarket riot in 1886 led to the execution of four anarchists for rhetoric that supposedly influenced an unknown person to throw a bomb into a crowd of peaceful strikers.⁸ The South, meanwhile, saw “legal disenfranchisement, the passage of rigorous Jim Crow laws, new and more horrible forms of lynching, and a series of one-sided race riots” (Fredrickson 266). There were such riots in two prominent Southern cities at the turn of the century: in Wilmington, North Carolina, a white supremacist coup in 1898 led to the expulsion of the city’s black politicians and the murder of black citizens; and in New Orleans in 1900, the death of a policeman at the hands of Robert Charles led to a white mob shooting black people while Charles evaded the law for a time, returning fire on those who hunted him down.⁹

Ryan references some of these events when she writes that urban festivals and processions, which in the antebellum age celebrated diverse groups coming “together in a short-term commitment to [a] larger civic identity” (15), devolved after the war: “Hatred of Chinese Americans, antagonism to those of African descent, bitterness between Irish

⁶ See Ryan 229-234.

⁷ See Johnson Jr.

⁸ See Smith, *Urban Disorder*.

⁹ See Fraser.

Catholics and Irish Protestants blemished parades across the country” (257). Though Ryan’s history ends in the late nineteenth century, we could add the 1913 Women’s Suffrage March to the list of “blemished parades”: as they marched the streets of the capital the day before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration, many women were verbally and physically assaulted while the police stood there doing nothing.¹⁰ Ryan notes that, “for better and for worse,” these ceremonies gave “some bolder names and clearer shapes to the differences that had been spectral antagonists” in antebellum urbanism (257). The last is a point that my study will build on: antagonisms, defined as any us/them relation, colored urban life and politics between 1865 and 1920. American realism, I argue, does not shy from, and in fact seeks out and works through the implications of urban antagonisms for literature and democracy alike.

All the authors in this study had some encounter with or interest in the historical antagonisms besetting urban life between 1865 and 1920. Howells was one of the few cultural commentators of his day to protest the miscarriage of justice surrounding the Haymarket riots. In a newspaper editorial that cost him friends and readers, he openly condemned the U.S. government for killing innocent people for their beliefs.¹¹ Cahan, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who became one of Howells’s many discoveries, was a central figure in the Lower East Side Yiddish-speaking socialist movement. In this capacity, he supported and coordinated numerous strikes in New York City, seeking shorter and safer working conditions for the city’s Jewish workers. In *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt produced a timely and, to Howells’s mind, “bitter” account of the 1898 Wilmington massacre. Even James and Wharton, ostensibly apolitical and continentally minded, were fascinated by the physical growth and population changes in the cities of their youth (New

¹⁰ See Taylor.

¹¹ See Cady, *Realist* 70-72.

York and Boston). For both, the so-called woman question stood out most vividly in these Northeastern hubs as the country tensely reunified itself after the Civil War.

We can start to trace out how an urban antagonism makes its way to the pages of American literary realism by turning to Howells's own description of his meeting with Whitman at Pfaff's, written in 1901. Although Howells is mostly rosy-eyed in his account, a strange detail stands out: "I remember how he leaned back in his chair, and reached out his great hand to me, as if he were going to give it [to] me for good and all. . . . [W]e hardly passed a word, and our acquaintance was summed up in . . . the grasp of his mighty fist upon my hand" (*Literary Friends* 74). Again, the image (fig. 1) speaks louder than words: their hands meet in what looks like an abyss between them. It is as if Whitman has, indeed, given his hand to Howells while Howells's hand has simultaneously collapsed into his "mighty fist."

When Howells wrote a bar encounter into *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), he worked some of the strange, latently violent elements of this handshake into clearer thematic focus. In this scene, Basil March—the same character from *Their Wedding Journey*—is taken out to a small Italian restaurant by Fulkerson, who has convinced the Marches to move from Boston to New York to edit a literary magazine. They dine in a converted parlor-room "set about with tables, where men smoked cigarettes between the courses, and a single waiter ran swiftly to and fro with plates and dishes and exchanged unintelligible outcries with a cook beyond a slide in the back parlor" (Howells, *Hazard* 71). As Fulkerson broaches the topic he has brought March here to discuss (that their financial "angel" is a natural gas tycoon), March "was watching, with a teasing sense of familiarity, a tall, shabbily dressed, elderly man who had just come in. . . . March recognized him at once as German. His carriage was erect and soldierly, and March presently saw that he had lost his left hand" (74). As they leave, March asks if this is Mr. Lindau, an old acquaintance from Indiana. His suspicions are

confirmed: “the old man took his hand and made a mechanical movement with his mutilated arm, as if he could have taken it in a double clasp. He laughed at himself. ‘I wanted to gife you the other handt too, but I gafe it to your gountry a goodt while ago’” (82).

Howells’s feeling that Whitman wanted to give him his hand is written here not only as a macabre joke but also as a sobering reminder of the violence of the Civil War. It is a reminder of that and much more, since Lindau “was fighting the antislavery battle just as naturally at Indianapolis in 1858 as he fought behind the barricades at Berlin in 1848” (83). With the war over and slavery apparently eradicated, though neither Howells nor Lindau understands how slavery continued under different names, Lindau has turned his energies to the labor question in New York. He will eventually lose the rest of his arm and then his life after a violent streetcar strike. Before this, Lindau joins March’s magazine as a translator but upsets the tycoon, Dryfoos, with his socialist rhetoric, requiring tense discussions to reach a resolution. Lindau stops working for the magazine, symbolically sending him back to the streets to be killed. I will argue, in chapter 1, that Howells seeks everyday urbanism neither in the domestic spaces his characters inhabit (the “equality” practiced therein being make-believe) nor in the streets during a strike. Like Whitman, Howells searches for a crowd feeling capable of uniting strangers rather than tearing them apart. The Marches revel in the “fleeting intimacy” (54) created by the noise of the elevated train, which is similar to the connection Whitman felt with commuters on the Brooklyn Ferry half a century earlier, though updated to account for technological developments in public transportation.

At this stage, I will use March’s encounter with Lindau in the bar to sketch the larger theoretical dimensions of this study. Lindau’s missing hand points to the visibility of urban antagonism in the American realist novel. It is a paradoxical visibility, which has nothing to do with the realists’ supposed focus on the known, the tangible, the visible. We are dealing

here with the presence of a ghastly absence. We can understand this paradox by turning back to Ryan's description of the difference between antebellum and postbellum urbanism, the latter giving "bolder names and clearer shapes to the differences that had been spectral antagonists" (257). The image of antagonists becoming more sharply defined could be amenable with a "positivistic vision" (Den Tandt 17); but the adjective "spectral" opens up a different, anti-positivist reading of antagonism, one that, I will show, is consistent with the realists' approach to the aesthetics and politics of urban life.

In Jacques Derrida's account, spectrality undoes dichotomies like past/present and absent/present: "the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back" (48). "Spectral" does not describe the *before* stage of an antagonist's appearance, I argue, but the condition and effect of an antagonism. In Jameson's vivid description, the always untimely appearance of a specter "makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world—indeed of matter itself—now shimmers like a mirage," showing that "the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be" (*Valences* 142). An antagonism, as this study defines it, is an experience where "reality" falters and becomes out of joint with itself, imperiling one's sense of self and one's place in the world. The eruption of us-versus-them relations, for example, shocks city people out of their routines and identities, forcing them to confront the vague, undefined violence that is always simmering under the surface and, in many cases, forcing them to occupy a new role as "friend" or "enemy." This is how Chesnutt describes the opening of the Wilmington massacre:

At three o'clock sharp the streets were filled, as if by magic, with armed white men. The negroes, going about, had noted, with uneasy curiosity, that the stores and places of business, many of which closed at noon, were unduly late in opening for the afternoon, though no one suspected the reason for the delay; but at three o'clock every passing colored man was ordered, by the first white man he met, to throw up his hands . . . and then warned to get off the street. (*Marrow* 164)

Ostensibly the object of Chesnutt's realist representation, the riot itself proves impossible to capture directly—it would be like staring into the sun; instead, he makes it the subject of a character's present and future haunting: "In his dreams he repeats it night after night, and sees the sights that wounded his eyes, and feels the thoughts—the haunting spirits of the thoughts—that tore through his heart as he rode through hell" (171).

Lindau's missing hand has a similar "*spectrality effect*" on those who see it (Derrida 48):

[Fulkerson] was one of those Americans whose habitual conception of life is unalloyed prosperity. When any experience or observation of his went counter to it he suffered something like physical pain. He eagerly shrugged away the impression left upon his buoyancy by Lindau and added to March's continued silence, "What did I tell you about meeting every man in New York that you ever knew before?" (Howells, *Hazard* 82)

Lindau's missing hand is (not) there to remind Howells's characters and readers that democracy did not arrive and become equal with itself (i.e., true to its name) after the Civil War; its wounds have not healed and, in fact, can only be further torn open. And, as March's response to Fulkerson makes clear, the big city is a place where you run into the ghosts of your past—not the dead in this case but someone who should have died or at least never reappeared, since the disheveled, mutilated veteran disrupts one's sense of self and country: "I never expected to meet Lindau in the world again," Basil tells Fulkerson. "I had the impression that he had been killed in the war. I almost wish he had been" (82). From their point of view, Lindau's missing hand introduces the troubling specter of poverty and class struggle that they would rather ignore ("That shabby dress! That pathetic mutilation!") (83). Right before Lindau's entrance into the text, in fact, Fulkerson gives a speech condemning New York's socialists, pointing to a future conflict not just between him and Lindau but between *us* and *them*: "They [socialists] do a lot of mischief, shooting off their mouths round

here. I believe in free speech and all that, but I'd like to see those fellows shut up in jail and left to jaw each other to death. *We* don't want any of their poison" (74).

The city is "the setting and the subject" of the American realist novel, I argue, because it carries the most potential energy for an outbreak of antagonism as well as for perceiving scars of past conflicts that are also symptoms of an antagonism's future return—indeed, Lindau loses the rest of his arm in a streetcar strike (Kaplan 44). An urban antagonism—whether the outbreak of violence in the streets or a symptom of violence to come—points to an unending civil war tearing apart society on multiple fronts (race, class, gender, nationality). For that reason, the awareness of an urban antagonism also produces a desire to heal the social wound, though this solution always proves illusory or imaginary. Indeed, when Lindau's death brings the once-divided newspaper office together in *Hazard*, "there was a poetry that appealed to [March] in this reconciliation through death of men, of ideas, of conditions, that could only have gone warring on in life" (395). Borrowing a term from Jameson, Kaplan deems this Howells's "strategy of containment" (10) for urban violence: "He kills off Lindau at the end of the novel . . . to protect the unifying goal of realism from conflict and fragmentation. At the same time, he shows that the necessary expulsion of this threatening foreign force blocks the achievement of unity" (58). It is *because* Howells and the realists are aware that narrative containment both requires and is threatened by absent-present remainders, I argue, that they search for alternative, and often progressive, means of conjuring these "spectral antagonists" without wishing them away (Ryan 257).¹²

The realists in this study—Howells, James, Cahan, Wharton, and Chesnutt—realize that they cannot directly perceive let alone objectively describe the violent energy evoked by the antagonisms of American urban life; so, they call attention to such violent urban realities

¹² See Derrida 49-50 for the two meanings of "conjure" (to form an alliance against and to evoke).

through its scars and symptoms (Lindau's missing hand) or through metaphor and allegory.¹³ Once it is indirectly represented, the realists channel antagonistic energy into a character system where people and ideas "g[o] on warring" without hope of final reconciliation (Howells, *Hazard* 395). In other words, the paradoxical absent presence of an antagonism makes itself felt most concretely in the tense character debates it sparks. Yet, there is still an entire world "out there" not participating in character debates (Kaplan 9). While this is a byproduct of antagonism's "*spectrality effect*"—there is always an excluded remainder waiting to come back—the realists leveraged this reality for radical-democratic ends (Derrida 48). On the one hand, we can speak of the progressive work of the American realist novel as an evolving discourse: identifying with the aesthetic and political aims of realism, authors from various backgrounds included new kinds of characters and situations under the democratic umbrella of everyday urbanism. On the other hand, they attempt to reach those who populate the world "out there" without channeling their presence through what Kaplan, following Raymond Williams, calls the "knowable community" (47). The appearance of the nameless bodies and voices from "out there" in the foreground of novelistic representation is antagonistic to realism itself, since their very existence exposes the specious totality of the "knowable community," however tense and diverse. These authors had to ask themselves, or answer in practice, whether it was the death of realism or its radical reconfiguration that resulted from the antagonistic appearance of these constitutively missing bodies and voices.

To articulate the aesthetic and political implications of urban antagonism in the context of American realism, I will now sketch the theoretical paradigm at the center of this dissertation: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's conception of social antagonism and

¹³ I will discuss these representational options in more detail below.

hegemony.¹⁴ Their work, together and solo, insists on the intractability of antagonism in liberal-democratic society; and they have proposed radical solutions for working with, rather than ignoring, us/them relations in democratic theory and Left politics. Laclau and Mouffe have been thrown prematurely into the dustbin of “theory” for their reliance on figures like Derrida, which leads them into abstractions at odds with their concrete political aims.¹⁵ I will make the case for their usefulness for a historically-grounded theory of American realism.

It will be my claim, in what follows, that Henry James uncannily prefigures the philosophical underpinnings of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory in one of his most famous prefaces. I will then argue that certain historical factors—the end of the Civil War and the rise of the big city—paved the way for an understanding of social antagonism not as a conflict between geographically-distinct regions (North/South, city/country) or between predefined “antagonists” but rather as a proliferation of possible, and hence spectral, conflicts within the liberal-democratic state and, more specifically, individual cities. The following sections will illustrate the general method of this study by triangulating nineteenth- and twentieth-century realist texts, twentieth- and twentieth-century political philosophers, and the sociopolitical realities of the United States between 1865 and 1920, when the country officially became an urban nation. The result will be a consideration of American realists as public philosophers of democracy and antagonism for an urban age, writers whose lessons are as relevant today as they were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

I. Antagonism and Democratic Discourse

¹⁴ Derrida cites Laclau and Mouffe in *Specters of Marx* (226 n. 31) as precursors of the kind of post-Marxism he aims to create by conjuring the specter of Marx in a moment of neoliberal hegemony. In turn, as we will see, Laclau and Mouffe were heavily influenced by Derridean deconstruction in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

¹⁵ See Judis.

In their now-classic study on the possibility of a radical Left politics, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe define antagonism as the experience of the limits of “the social.” They state, in no uncertain terms, that “the social” is not an object that can be viewed as a totality from the perspective of an objective Marxian science. Rather, following Derrida, they argue that “the social” is defined by a system of differences with no outside, no “transcendental signifier” that would fix the internal elements definitively, nailing the signifier to the signified once and for all (98). While this leads them to the conclusion that society is “impossible,” they draw on Jacques Lacan to argue the following:

If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to . . . arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. [Following Lacan, they] call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. (98-99)

Hegemony names the practice of creating a nodal point or, to use Lacan’s phrase, “quilting point” that sutures signifiers into a chain of signification (Lacan 268). Since there is always an excess of other possible meanings for the elements in this chain, nothing is fixed completely. Antagonism marks the recognition of the failure of the local sutures or quasi-totalities to fix meaning definitively and “arrest the flow of differences” once and for all.

There is a fascinating homology between Laclau and Mouffe’s poststructuralist account of society’s impossibility and James’s description of writing in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (*Literary* 1041).¹⁶ James, like Lacan, takes his metaphor from quilting:

a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for

¹⁶ Barrish notes the parallels between this statement and Derrida’s “il n’y a pas d’hors de texte” (there is no outside of the text) but he does not mention Lacan and his “points de capiton.” See *American* 69.

the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. (1041)

If realism is defined by the totality created by a select group of characters engaged in “relations,” James evinces an awareness, within the American tradition, of the arbitrary stitches that fix the unending, endlessly configurable relations of life into an aesthetic unity covering the “little holes” of the canvas. Faced with the antagonistic limits of society, in other words, the artist “has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it” (1041). Or, as Laclau and Mouffe have it: “every language and every society are constituted as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them” (111).

If “the social” is defined by a field of differences and local nodal points fixing some of those signifiers in a chain of relations (i.e., a hegemonic totality), how does one experience the failure of this system? In other words, how does antagonism begin? Laclau and Mouffe’s answer is: when the logic of equivalence interrupts the field of differences. Again, we find a difficult-to-grasp abstraction; but Laclau and Mouffe ground these claims in an historical example: what Tocqueville called the “democratic revolution” of the eighteenth century (139). This moment represents the articulation between two distinct discourses: the liberal language of individual freedom and equality, with its valorization of pluralism and difference, meets the democratic logic of political equality, which in Carl Schmitt’s formulation means radical equivalence or identity between citizens, and the concept of popular sovereignty.¹⁷ The conflictual combination of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty in liberal-democratic discourse “impos[ed] itself as the new matrix of the social imaginary” and “constitute[d] a fundamental nodal point in the construction of the political” (138-139). The liberal-democratic revolution created a new socio-symbolic order that, by definition, can

¹⁷ See Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox* 44-45; and “Democratic Politics” 42-43. In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe acknowledges the importance of civic republicanism “in the revolutionary period” (24). See chapter 4.

never be completed or fully realized: it is precisely what constituted “the social” as an endless flux of signifiers and hegemonic sutures. In her solo work, Mouffe goes on to argue that the constitutive tension between the “grammars” of liberalism and democracy “can never be overcome but only negotiated in different ways. This is why the liberal-democratic regime has constantly been the locus of struggles. The tension between its two components can only be temporarily stabilized through pragmatic negotiations between political forces which always establish the hegemony of one of them” (*Democratic Paradox* 5).

In his global history of democracy, *Toward Democracy* (2016), James Kloppenberg notes, in terms that are strikingly similar to Laclau and Mouffe’s, that “the concepts of popular sovereignty, autonomy, and equality are mutually constitutive; they have no meaning except in relation to each other. . . . The internal tensions between the principle of popular sovereignty and the principles of autonomy and equality make the notion of a smooth-running, conflict-free democracy a contradiction in terms” (8-9). Democracy marks the radical *impossibility* of a closed system of fixed differential meanings, as was the case with the Ancien Régime.¹⁸ After the American Revolution, Richard Schneirov and Gaston Fernandez explain, taking us back into the U.S. context,

Americans quickly discovered that even when rid of monarchy and aristocracy, the people were not a united, harmonious whole. Despite the appeal of revolution’s leaders to citizens’ civic virtue, the people invariably split up into factions or interest groups, the most important being those based on different kinds and amounts of private property. Some Americans were creditors, some were debtors; some made money from exporting, others from importing; some made a living from enslaving other human beings who were not part of the political community, while others were independent farmers or merchants; some were rich, and many more were poor with little or no property. How was it possible to prevent a single dominant faction or majority coalition of self-interested factions from corrupting the republic, reducing it to a tyranny, and oppressing the rest of the people or a minority of the people? (15)

¹⁸ See Lefort.

In Laclau and Mouffe's account, relations of subordination (creditor/debtor, master/slave) are not automatically but rather *become* oppressive and hence antagonistic when held against the liberal-democratic promise of freedom and equality for all. To clarify their use of terms, "*relations of oppression* . . . [are] those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms" (138). An oppression is the site of antagonism on the individual level insofar as "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself" (111), which is true for both oppressor and oppressed. Howells puts it succinctly: "You spoil the joy of life for your inferior, just as your superior spoils the joy of life for you" ("Equality" 64). Antagonism, as an "experience of the limit of the social," is felt as an "identity crisis": the Other creates the condition for self-identification around a chain of equivalence (I am/we are "not them") *and* puts this identity into question ("its objective being is a symbol of my [or our] non-being") (Laclau and Mouffe 113). The Other is not one identity among others but an amorphous force of pure negativity and violence threatening and yet defining the self. On the sociopolitical level, oppression is antagonistic when the oppressed cite the democratic promises they have been denied, with the Other as that force blocking my access to and enjoyment of freedom and equality.¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe clarify that "the forms of resistance to new forms of subordination are polysemic and can perfectly well be articulated into an anti-democratic discourse" (153). For example, neoliberalism draws on the classical liberal tradition to paint the democratic state and its welfare recipients as oppressors and the hard-working, independent, traditionally-minded, and often white individuals as the oppressed (154). Chesnutt, in his time, showed that white supremacists believed *they*, for whom democracy was fought during the Revolution, were oppressed by the economic and political gains made by blacks after the Civil War. Laclau and Mouffe aim to

¹⁹ See Laclau and Mouffe 138.

make antagonism work for Left politics without relying on the assumption that Schneirov and Fernandez evince above—that relations of subordination surrounding private property are the “most important” (15). Antagonism is put to radical-democratic ends when different groups “propose . . . different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression” (Laclau and Mouffe 139). Laclau and Mouffe match group equivalence with the liberal idea of autonomy. In a radical-democratic hegemony, each group (anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist) is autonomous but “produce[s] effects of equivalence with other struggles in a differential political space” (164).

The American Civil War and its aftermath represent a particularly vivid instance of a polarizing us/them relation splitting off into a plurality of potential antagonisms, radical and conservative. In antebellum America, politicians, capitalists, (ex-)slaves, and ordinary citizens formed alliances across political, regional, racial, and class lines on the moral and economic issue of slavery in a growing republic. Once the South seceded, these alliances hardened into what Laclau and Mouffe call “a clear-cut ‘politics of frontiers’” between the pro-Union, pro-democratic North and the pro-states rights, pro-slavery South (120). The contingent result of this war was the emancipation of slaves (the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment), the promise of equal protection before the law (the Fourteenth Amendment), and suffrage for black men (the Fifteenth Amendment). With the implementation of Reconstruction, which sought to secure the South’s adherence to those war amendments while at the same time institutionalizing free and equal black-white relations, a new conception of democracy was born.²⁰ The liberal ideal of freedom from coercion and the

²⁰ See Du Bois’s groundbreaking essay “Of the Dawn of Freedom” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (13-35).

promise of free contracts met hand-in-hand with the promise of social *and* political equality protected by a centralized “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”²¹

Lindau’s missing hand has already shown, however, that the war’s conclusion did not “bind up the nation’s wounds,” as Lincoln anticipated in his “Second Inaugural Address” (1865). Instead, as the progressive Dr. Miller learns in *The Marrow of Tradition*, “the old wound [is] still bleeding, [and] the fruit of one tragedy [becomes] the seed of another” (70-71). White supremacism is but one example. W.E.B. Du Bois argues, in *Darkwater* (1920), that the promises of the Civil War amendments and state-sponsored Reconstruction ran aground on deepening race hatred (codified by Jim Crow), class strife from the industrial revolution, and the ongoing exclusion of women from public life. Du Bois calls for the creation of new political identities to demand equal participation in democratic life, knowing that “[t]he appearance of new interests and complaints means disarrangement and confusion to the older equilibrium” (*Darkwater* 84). He links socialism and women’s suffrage with black civil rights as forces that “will for many years confuse our politics” (85). Du Bois hopes for the extension of suffrage, the elimination of Jim Crow, and the “democratic ownership of industry,” “where no human soul will be neglected” and “[t]he problem of government . . . would be to reduce the necessary conflict of human interests to the minimum” (91, 84). Laclau and Mouffe believe that there will never be an end to antagonism. They uncover oppressions in different situations to show how oppressed groups or identities are equivalent in their arbitrary exclusion from sociopolitical life and the rights/protections it implies.

Kenneth Warren has argued that American literary realism aimed to create such an ever-expanding radical-democratic hegemony: “these fictions often evinced a commitment to imagining the consequences that would ensue from an ‘extension of the field of

²¹ See Schneirov and Fernandez 22-25.

democratic struggles to the whole of civil society and the state” (13) (he quotes Laclau and Mouffe [160]). The hope was that, “as realism secured a position as the dominant aesthetic in the nation’s most prestigious magazines[,] the unfinished business of black political liberation would emerge from the relative oblivion that had enveloped it following the abandonment of Radical Reconstruction” (50). Realism’s extension of literary representation to new people and situations is homologous to, if not part of the same historical process as, the democratic promises of Reconstruction.²² According to Warren, though, the radical-democratic aesthetics of three realist authors (James, Howells, Chesnutt) were doomed from the beginning.²³ This is because their treatment of the personal and the social as political fed into racist fears of absolute social equality in public space, fueling arguments in support of Jim Crow laws in the South and complicity with those laws in the North. More specifically, realism invalidated the “liberal” defense against Jim Crow legislation, stated most forcefully by fellow realist George Washington Cable, who distinguished between civil equality (equal access to public space so long as you behave properly) and social equality (the loss of distinction between the street and the home). Warren views liberalism as the road not taken by other realists. Mary Esteve similarly faults Cahan for blurring the personal and the political in his representation of Lower East Side crowds, feeding nativist anxieties about immigration in the process, instead of opting for a properly liberal distinction between politics and everyday urban life (174).

The realist novel, under Howells’s direction, did indeed spread beyond the issue of “black political liberation,” or at least treated race in reductive ways (Warren 50). But this is where Chesnutt makes his intervention. As I argue in chapter 5, he returns the American

²² See Thomas 1-2.

²³ James and Howells are discussed throughout Warren’s monograph. Chesnutt only receives a few passing mentions (see Warren 78-79 and chapter 5 of this dissertation).

realist novel to its origins by leveraging liberalism's starting point (the equality of all humans qua humans) for radical-democratic ends (social and political equality). People "are willing to concede the Negro *this* kind of equality, but deny him *that* kind of equality," Chesnutt writes. "There is but one kind of equality, as there is but one kind of truth" (*Essays* 254). Warren's starting point is correct even if his conclusion is not: the realists, like Laclau and Mouffe, extend democratic struggles beyond the privileged people and places of liberal-democratic politics; but this is an ongoing project filled with failures as well as successes.

Importantly, for our purposes, Laclau and Mouffe deem the "urban" a new site for the extension of the democratic imaginary. But their analysis relates specifically to the aftereffects of twentieth-century (sub)urbanization. The implication is that the world is far more complex now than before, so that there is a "multiplicity of social relations from which antagonisms and struggles may originate" within the city alone (145). It has been my claim that, after the Civil War, the division of the U.S. into North and South split off into a series of internal battles. I will now argue that the East Coast city became a node in realist discourse for marking the proliferation of antagonisms in postbellum American society.

While the rise of the industrial city resulted in the draining of the countryside, which hardened regional distinctions and prejudices,²⁴ the country-city divide was reconfigured as the U.S. became an interconnected urban society after the Civil War. Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park, noted that "the intimacy of [the farmer's] family with the town will constantly appear, in dress, furniture, viands, [and] in . . . conversation" (qtd. in Klimasmith 62). "To speak of metropolis," Trachtenberg writes, "is to speak not only of individual cities but of a national system, a coordination of urban regions linked by rail and telegraph, creating a network of producing and consuming goods" (115). Mr. Hughes, a

²⁴ See Trachtenberg 112-115.

character in Howells's *The World of Chance* (1893) who comes to New York after years in socialistic communes, describes why a realist might set up shop in urban centers instead of the regional spaces that fed them with people and goods: "If I had back the years that I have wasted in a perfectly futile effort to deal with the problem of the race at a distance where I couldn't touch it, I would have nothing to do with eremitism in any of its forms" (90). There are many great realists—often termed regionalists—who explore the country's antagonisms from a rural point of view (Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, and Sarah Orne Jewett, for example). The ones in this study look to its economic and cultural centers, Boston and New York, as well as smaller but regionally-important cities along the Atlantic Coast.

To understand what they found, I turn to *The American Scene* (1907), James's travel narrative detailing a 1904/05 trip up and down the Atlantic Coast after twenty years abroad.

II. Antagonism and the City

The American Scene follows a meandering itinerary, with every chapter but the first and last (New England and Florida, respectively) named after an East Coast city—a list that runs the gamut from large metropolises to mid-size regional cities: four chapters on New York City and one each on Newport, Boston, Concord and Salem, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and Charleston. James names Democracy as the force behind everything he sees from the moment he disembarks in New York:

The great presence that bristles him on the sounding dock, and that shakes the planks, the loose boards of its theatric stage to an inordinate unprecedented rumble, is the monstrous form of Democracy, which is thereafter to project its shifting angular shadow, at one time and another, across every inch of the field of his vision. It is the huge democratic broom that has made the clearance and that one seems to see brandished in the empty sky. (*American Scene* 43-44)²⁵

²⁵ Hereafter cited parenthetically as *AS*.

Figured first as a “presence” that shakes the dock, then as a “shifting angular shadow,” and finally as a “broom,” Democracy is a powerful, shadowy, and ubiquitous force. Generalizing from this moment, I argue that, for the authors in this study, cities along the Atlantic Coast became privileged sites for witnessing the sweeping force and blind spots of the democratic revolution. For these authors, that is, the East Coast city is defined by its place within the overflowing discursive field created by the democratic revolution. Some qualifications are needed to understand precisely what this means and, by extension, what it does not.

First, I do not intend to suggest that the city has no extra-discursive presence. Rather, the material reality of the city is interpreted through the language of liberal-democratic discourse. Mouffe uses the example of kicking a ball: it is a physical act, but how we understand that kick depends on its discursive context—say, the rules of a soccer match.²⁶ In Carl Smith’s provocative formulation, “a city is as much an *infrastructure of ideas* as it is a gathering of people, a layout of streets, an arrangement of buildings, or a collection of political, economic, and social institutions” (*City Water* 2). Smith’s examples are antebellum waterworks projects, which “brought to the fore conflicting ideas of the public good, including disagreements over what resources should be provided, and by whom, to that elusive entity, ‘the people,’ in a burgeoning capitalist democracy” (4). To use a postbellum example, a skyscraper is a physical object constructed out of steel, concrete, and glass, but it only comes into existence with paperwork and bureaucratic oversight (blueprints, contracts, city codes, etc.) and with a host of ground-level interpretations by the city’s everyday users. Note, for example, how realist writer Henry Blake Fuller describes Chicago’s skyscrapers:

[F]or the first time in the rearing of a vast city, the high and the low have met together, the rich and the poor have *built* together: each with an astonishing freedom as to choice, taste, expenditure; each with an extreme, even an undue liberty to indulge in whatever independences or idiosyncrasies might be suggested by greed,

²⁶ See Barret 258.

pride, carelessness, or the exigency of the passing moment,—democracy absolutely manifested in brick, stone, timber. (“The Upward Movement” 308)

When James and Wharton looked at the same structures on the East Coast, they pondered the dangers of democratic conformism. Thus, feats of urban engineering produced conflicting interpretations of the city and the democratic experiment it came to represent.

That being said, the city and its material elements are not *necessarily* imbricated in the fate of democracy, though there is often a privileged site of democracy in the cultural imaginary—the farm, the meeting-house, the open sea, the frontier, etc. For our purposes, it is in Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871) that the postbellum American city first became attached to the fate of both democracy and literature:

When I . . . behol[d] the crowds of the great cities, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, New Orleans, Baltimore—when I mix with these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured, independent citizens, clerks, young persons—at the idea of this mass of men so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, a singular awe falls upon me. I feel, with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorb’d the central spirit and idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpress’d. (34)

Whitman is not all positive, though. His depiction of New York leads to a Jamesian “pro and con” list, with the boundless energy of the crowd and the great material growth of the city in the positive column but conformism, machine politics, and a general lack of moral fiber among the negative traits holding “the people” back from an expression of democratic culture (13-14, 16). One can perceive the start of a tradition stretching to the Progressive Era, specifically to Frederic Howe’s *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (1905). Howe relates what he calls “The Profit Account” (24-31) and “The Loss Account” (32-42) for the state of democracy in urban America. Despite all the “[v]ice, crime, and disease”; despite the replacement of the home with “the hotel, flat, tenement, boarding house, and cheap lodging house”; despite “corruption [that] has so allied itself with our institutions that many despair

of democracy,” there is still hope for the future, as Whitman promised, augured in already-existing spaces (32): the “saloon, . . . the streets, the parks, the theatre, the church, . . . night schools, art exhibitions, popular lectures, and concerts, college settlements, . . . playgrounds, a cheap press, labor organizations” (25). All of which, Howe claims, “is enlarging life, modifying our civilization, deepening the significance of democracy” (25). For Whitman, it is poetry, while for the realists of the Howells school it is the novel that can best absorb and express the democratic gains of the city while also exposing its blind spots.

The reference to democracy’s blind spots requires another qualification with respect to the discursive articulation between the city and democracy, since it brings antagonism back into the picture. “By the 1880s,” Kaplan writes, “*the city* had become a shorthand term for everything threatening in American society” (44). In the scenario Kaplan has in mind, the Others threatening self and society are huddled in a slum. But a city can be antagonistic in a different sense. Defined as the “density of densities,” “the concentration not just of people but of materials, capital, and the human transformation of nature” (Rotella 1), the city threatens personal and national stability with a surplus of beliefs, identities, and practices that might run counter to the hegemonic notion of what “the people” or a citizen look(s) and sound(s) like. For the realists, who made the urban everyday the touchstone of democracy, the city is a frightening but enticing surplus of bodies, voices, and situations that have not been given representation, politically or aesthetically. To use a phrase shared by Whitman and Derrida, the flowering of both urban and literary democracy is always “to come.”

Whitman believed that the democracy “to come” would be in the West: the U.S. capital “will migrate a thousand or two miles” and “[t]he main social, political, spine-character of the States will probably run along the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi rivers” (*Vistas* 30). By dint of biographical accident and professional affiliation, the realist authors in

this study stayed on the Atlantic side of things—near literary-cultural centers like Boston, New York, London, and Paris. Among literary critics influenced by world-systems theory (Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye) there has been attention paid recently to the twinned destinies of international publishing centers, which often doubled as imperial metropolises, and the aesthetic and political influence of classical realism. However, the focus has been on the rise and fall of European realism alongside the slow decline of Paris, London, and St. Petersburg/Moscow as literary and political hegemons. When the U.S. become a literary and world-systems hegemon after World War I, the argument goes, romance and modernism triumphed while realism became labeled as provincial at best and dangerous at worst.²⁷

Our focus will be on a neglected time and place in these accounts—the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when, Glazener writes, “cultural authority . . . was intensely localized, concentrated in the Northeast and especially in urban centers such as New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia” (23). Even James and Wharton, the only writers in this study who might be deemed continental, had close ties to these literary-cultural centers. James was born in New York but his family moved to the Boston area when he was just starting out as a writer. Wharton tacitly described herself when she writes, of her character Newland Archer, that “in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker” (*Age* 80). Wharton published exclusively in Charles Scribner’s Sons in New York before switching to the *Pictorial Review* (NY). James published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Boston), *Harper’s Weekly*, (NY), *Century* (NY), and *Cosmopolitan* (NY) before naming the final collection of his work the New York Edition.

Howells, Chesnutt, and Cahan were considered outsiders—the first two came from Ohio, the latter from Russia—in the fierce literary marketplaces James and Wharton called

²⁷ See especially Cleary 258, 262-263.

home. Howells started out as a writer for central Ohio newspapers before moving to Boston. He made his name at *The Atlantic Monthly*, succeeding James T. Fields as editor-in-chief in 1871 before moving to New York in 1885 to take over the “editor’s chair” at *Harper’s Weekly*. He became the spokesperson for literary realism, a figure whose good review or letter of recommendation could help a writer at any stage of his or her career. James, Cahan, Chesnutt, and Wharton all benefitted from Howells’s professional support.²⁸

The other Ohio transplant, Chesnutt, did not rise to the same dizzying literary heights as Howells, though his aesthetic, sociopolitical, and legal defense of black civil rights has made him an important figure across several disciplines. Chesnutt moved with his family from Ohio to rural North Carolina before going alone to Charlotte and then trying his hand at being a writer in New York. “The lack of literary centers in the South,” Richard Brodhead writes, “meant that Chesnutt’s ambition to write always drove him mentally northward, the North being the place where a literary career could be successfully established in his time. And it was by studying the operation of northern literary markets . . . that Chesnutt came to discover black southern life as a possible literary subject” (21). His first story “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887) appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, with six more stories published there between 1887 and 1904. While Chesnutt wrote about Northern urban life,²⁹ his best novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), published by Boston’s Houghton Mifflin, details the 1898 “revolution” in Wilmington, the largest city in North Carolina at the time.

Cahan’s journey to America began with reactionary violence in Russia ten years before the Wilmington massacre. He escaped the country during the anti-Semitic pogroms

²⁸ On Howells and James, see Anesko; on Howells and Cahan, see Kirk and Kirk; on Howells and Chesnutt, see McElrath, “W.D. Howells.” See also Anesko 461-463 for letters from James to Howells involving the latter’s contribution to Wharton’s edited volume, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), the proceeds of which went to the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee (a charity for Belgian war refugees organized by Wharton).

²⁹ See *Northern Stories*, ed. Duncan. In his fiction, Cleveland (or Groveland) often represents the northern city.

of 1881, hoping to join one of several anarchist communes created by fellow Jewish refugees. Instead, he stayed in New York, working in a cigar factory and then tutoring children before editing the *Jewish Daily Forward* and writing stories set in the Lower East Side. “[I]t took me just three days,” he writes in his autobiography, sounding like Mr. Hughes from *The World of Chance*, “to realize that the establishment of commune colonies was not really my dream. I was not fascinated by village life . . . On the contrary, I felt strongly drawn to the life of the city. My heart beat with its rhythms” (Cahan, *Education* 226).

Even if Cahan “felt America’s freedom every minute” in the city, “all the time [he] was saying to [himself], ‘All of this is a capitalist prison’” (228). While he repeats the Marxian critique of democratic freedoms, there were also new divisions forming within the Jewish population of the Lower East Side that produced unforeseen obstacles to the orthodox Marxist vision of a future class consciousness arising amongst the (urban) proletariat:

Once, a woman passing by as a friend and I were conversing in Russian on East Broadway, turned on us with disgust and spat out: “T’fu! The nerve, actually talking Russian! Wasn’t it bad enough that you had to hear that dirty language in Russia?”

Even the uneducated immigrants could speak Russian, although they preferred Yiddish. But the intellectual minority spoke only Russian amongst themselves. This was a new thing in New York and it was because we were the first Russian-Jewish intellectuals in the United States . . . We could feel the resistance of the old-fashioned Suwalki Jews to the spirit of our new movement [Marxian socialism]. They considered us to be atheists and lunatics; we intellectuals thought of them as ignorant, primitive people. (225)

Working the pluralism of the Lower East Side into his novella *Yekl* (1896), Cahan puts a finer point on the aesthetic and political problem posed by the American city, not just for revolutionary politics but for liberal-democratic and realist discourse more broadly. He describes the variety of self-identification in the “Ghetto of the American metropolis” (13):

Lithuanian Jews, Volhynian Jews, south Russian Jews, Bessarabian Jews; Jews crowded out of the “pale of Jewish settlement”; Russified Jews expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kieff, or Saratoff; Jewish runaways from justice; Jewish refugees from crying political and economic injustice; people torn from a hard-gained foothold in life and from deep-rooted attachments by the caprice of

intolerance or the wiles of demagoguery [;] students shut out of the Russian universities, and come to these shores in quest of learning; artisans, merchants, teachers, rabbis, artists, beggars . . . [I]n fine, people with all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, inclinations, and speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pell-mell into one social cauldron—a human hodgepodge with its component parts all changed but not yet fused into a homogenous whole. (14)

Cahan wonders to what degree a heterogeneous neighborhood with varying methods of self-identification could be deemed “Jewish,” let alone “American” or “proletarian”—labels implying “a homogeneous whole.” James uses strikingly similar language to make a related point in *The American Scene*. The democratic “machine,” in the form of free public schools, slowly makes the “alien” elements of New York’s “hotch-potch” into “brothers and sisters” (*AS* 92). James has no problem naming the “elements” going into this “cauldron”—Jews, Italians, etc.—but is unsure of what will become of the “American” character in the future (92). Cahan has a better understanding of the changes to group self-identification that come with being “thrown pull-mell into one social cauldron” but is equally unsure of the communal identification “to come” (Cahan, *Yekl* 14). Working on different levels (local and national), these authors imagine the possibility of a future homogeneity, a sense of who “we” are, emerging from urban heterogeneity, though a final identity, they realize, will never arrive.

In *The American Scene*, to return to our guiding thread, James describes the unresolvable tension between equivalence and difference as giving rise to new antagonisms and new hegemonic positions, this time anticipating not just the philosophical underpinnings of Laclau and Mouffe’s philosophy (“relations stop nowhere”) but its political implications:

It is true, at any rate, that no application of the aristocratic, none of the democratic, idea is ever practically complete; discriminations are produced by the mere working of the machine. . . . Nature and industry keep producing differences as fast as constitutions keep proclaiming equality, and there are always, at the best, in any really liberal scheme or human view, more conscious inaptitudes to convince of their privilege than conscious possibilities to remind of their limits. (*AS* 240-241)

In Western society, “relations stop nowhere” and the democratic machine keeps churning precisely because constitutional proclamations of equality can never cover the ground of differences produced by nature and industry (James, *Literary* 1041). In a “liberal” democracy, James argues, one can either try and fail to convince oneself of “their privilege” or one can remind oneself of “their limits,” which could refer to the privileges/limits of “differences” or “constitutions.” James’s emphasis, however, is on the ongoing *clash* between the logics of equivalence and difference, and hence the ever-present possibility of antagonism in the American urban scene. While he wants to explore the limits of the liberal-democratic machine—where differences meet discursive claims to equality, in a process that never ends—it is more common to find “conscious inaptitudes to convince of their privilege.”

That strange phrase, “conscious inaptitude,” recalls Althusser’s famous definition of ideology as *misrecognition*: when an individual, the “little” subject, *consciously* identifies with the subjectivity prescribed by a “big” Subject (God, etc.), s/he simultaneously *fails* to see, *fails* to perceive, the antagonistic limits of this system (the capitalist relations of production).³⁰ We can accept Althusser’s Lacanian definition of ideology as an Imaginary relationship to the Real relations of production so long as we understand that there is not one antagonistic force (the class struggle as the Real) but rather many possible antagonisms. Applied to democratic theory, this conception of ideology—akin to Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemony—explains the cementing of the status quo, wherein people convince themselves they live in a democracy while privileging the fact that, due in part to nature and in part to industry, the promise of equality cannot apply to everybody or to every situation. In other words, they accept inequality in a democracy but instead of (repeatedly) exposing this fact as the limit of a system dedicated to human equality, as James and the realists do, liberals make the case

³⁰ See Althusser 54-57.

that it is a privilege—something to hold on to. They are satisfied with the equality in certain delimited places/spaces and argue that some sociopolitical differences are necessary. I will call this position, which critics too readily associate with the realists, “naïve liberalism.”

G.W. Cable embodies “naïve liberalism.” He argues that one distinction produced by the liberal-democratic machine—between social and political equality—must be retained. But at what cost? Bryan Wagner shows how Cable altered the Bras-Coupé legend in his realist novel about antebellum New Orleans, *The Grandissimes* (1879-1880), to fit the political viewpoint established in pieces like “The Freedmen’s Case in Equity” (1885). The Bras-Coupé legend, in Wagner’s reading, is tied to the codification of the “police power” in New Orleans. The police, in effect, created the myth of the lawless escaped slave living in the swamp outside the city, sealing his fate as a stateless person who is not afforded the rights the police are meant to protect. In both the police propaganda and the black vernacular tradition, Bras-Coupé is defined by his missing arm—the constant reminder of a battle with police (the connection to Lindau in *Hazard* should be noted). While the black vernacular tradition speaks “back” from the swamp and emphasizes the missing arm, Cable restores Bras-Coupé’s arm and eliminates the association between the police and racial violence. He does this, Wagner explains, to protect the distinction between black culture (folklore) and politics, “thereby cleans[ing] the state of racial contamination, preserving the possibility of a law that can make good on the pledge of equality” at the state level (Wagner, *Disturbing* 83).

Hegemony can be even more sinister when it comes to naturalizing distinctions produced by the liberal-democratic machine. In the timeframe covered here—1865 to 1920—Herbert Spencer’s American acolytes (William Graham Sumner and Andrew Carnegie most notably) took up the discourse of economic and philosophical liberalism, with its focus on individual freedom, and welded it to Social Darwinism’s conception of the

survival of the fittest, creating an anti-democratic hegemony akin to what we now call neoliberalism.³¹ In *Triumphant Democracy* (1886), Carnegie holds up the postbellum American city as a clear example of the discursive confluence of Social Darwinism and liberalism:

In 1830 only six and a half per cent. of the population lived in towns of eight thousand inhabitants and upwards; in 1880 the proportion had risen to twenty-two per cent. Thus, nearly one person in every four in America is now a member of a hive of more than eight thousand human beings. . . . The American, however, need not fear the unhealthy or abnormal growth of cities. . . . The free play of economic laws is keeping all quite right . . . Oh, these grand, immutable, all-wise laws of natural forces, how perfectly they work if human legislators would only let them alone! (47-48)

Carnegie articulates the “triumph” of democracy with differences evident in the city; but he wants to naturalize race, class, and gender differences under the guise of economic freedom while portraying big government as an enemy that meddles in this free play of differences.

Crucially, Carnegie points to the Western “mushroom” cities that grew out of nowhere after the Civil War—Chicago, St. Paul, Milwaukee, Kansas City, “to say nothing of the cities of the Pacific coast”—as the exemplars of the natural spread of free market capitalism in American democracy (50). The literary analogue for this position is not Whitman, who also placed hope in Western cities but without an ounce of Carnegie’s cutthroat economic beliefs; rather, it is American naturalism, which found in these new Western cities a snapshot of “natural” conflict playing itself out in so-called civilization. In chapter 3 I briefly compare Cahan’s realist masterpiece about a Social Darwinian businessman, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), to Jack London’s San Francisco novel *Martin Eden* (1909). For now, I want to make a point about the relation between literary form and geographic setting: just as a unique blend of realism took root in East Coast literary centers, so a unique blend of naturalism, one that matched Émile Zola’s Darwinism with an

³¹ See Hawkins 98 and chapter 3 of this dissertation for a comparison between these ideologies.

American rugged individualism, took root in “mushroom cities” like Chicago and cities along the Pacific coast.³² London’s account of a San Francisco street fight demonstrates that the Western city is the backdrop for a more elemental struggle to emerge: “Martin and Cheese-Face were two savages, of the stone age . . . They sank lower and lower into the muddy abyss, back into the dregs of the raw beginnings of life, striving blindly and chemically, as atoms strive . . . colliding, re-colliding, and colliding again and eternally again” (179). Martin’s victory augurs his “rise” as a writer: “You licked Cheese-Face and you’ll lick the editors if it takes thrice eleven years to do it in” (183). The self-made man, one of the founding myths of American democracy, is recast in Social Darwinian terms as an exceptional individual hardwired to triumph in a ruthlessly competitive urban market.

The fight scene in *Martin Eden* also demonstrates that Social Darwinism and literary naturalism mobilize us/them relations. In conservative thought, Laclau and Mouffe explain, “[a]n antagonism is . . . constructed between two poles: the ‘people’, which includes all those who defend the traditional values and freedom of enterprise; and their adversaries: the State and all the subversives (feminists, blacks, young people, and ‘permissives’ of every type” (154). The Forgotten Man, as Sumner calls the victim of the proto-welfare state, is snuffed out by the egalitarian imaginary (conformism, charity, big government). Martin Eden, London’s surrogate, calls the latter a “mongrel democracy that is nothing else than pseudo-socialism” and claims he “look[s] to the state for nothing” (384). The realist novel not only puts forward a representation of the city that uncovers new sites of social antagonism; it must confront and try to unseat an opposing, but still urban-antagonistic, conception of “the social” codified by literary naturalism and Social Darwinism.

³² There are of course exceptions one would want to point out: Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser on New York, Howells and Chesnut on the Midwestern city. There is also a Chicago school of realists that included Fuller, Robert Herrick, and David Graham Phillips. See Den Tandt 109-122.

This is what Laclau and Mouffe aim to do on the political level: they want to construct a sense of who “we” are for those who are excluded from the democratic imaginary by “them,” the defenders of the status quo or the anti-democratic Right. Radical democracy is hegemonic, but it is distinguished from naïve and anti-democratic liberalism by its awareness of the ever-receding limits of its own meaning-making operation: there is always an excess of people who remain in the democratic shadows, oppressed into silence. In naïve liberalism, these people are virtually ignored and in the neoliberal Darwinian view they *belong* in the shadows by dint of their failure to succeed. A radical-democratic political identity, by contrast, is constantly altered by the addition of new subjects and situations.

This is what American literary realism accomplishes, in my account. Recall James’s compromise as an artist: knowing that “relations stop nowhere,” he draws a circle with concrete, knowable relations (*Literary* 1041). By recognizing the limits of each creation, he opens the possibility of endless figurations. “The prime effect of so sustained a system,” James writes, “is to lead on and on” (1041). James, I have already implied, provides a political version of this thesis when he describes American democracy as a never-ending clash between equivalence and difference. As a writer and an urban explorer, James continually “remind[s]” himself of the “limits” of this system (*AS* 241). It is the plurality of possible sites of antagonism that makes the urban setting of American literary realism so rich but also so daunting. To write or to read realism means continually taking account of the limits of the symbolic order created by the democratic revolution by confronting new, previously excluded or marginalized urban spaces and bodies. Each author in this dissertation locates antagonism in different kinds of urban social relations, pointing to an underlying rift, tension, or violence besetting a particular city in a moment in its history. For Howells, antagonism names the tension between the bourgeois drawing room and New

York's "other half"; for James, it is a tug-of-war between men and women in the joint production of urban space in Boston (men build streets and buildings that women occupy and define); for Cahan, it is the Marxian conception of the class struggle as it is embodied in the Lower East Side sweatshop; for Wharton, it marks the clash between love and marriage in Old New York; and for Chesnutt, "race antagonism" is a combination of white supremacist discourse (e.g., local newspapers) and spatial practice (e.g., segregation) creating a narrative of "our" superiority over "them" that is constantly undermined by the realities of post-Reconstruction cities like Wilmington, with its large and influential black middle class.

Because antagonism can be articulated in different ways, I will call on different theorists of antagonism to help analyze the us/them relation at work in an author's oeuvre: Jameson (chapters 1-3); Slavoj Žižek (chapter 2); Jean-Paul Sartre (chapter 3); and Jacques Rancière (chapters 4 and 5). In the Lacanian tradition from which these thinkers emerged—*itself* an outgrowth of the Sartrean "dilemma of the Other" fully as much as Freudian psychoanalysis (Jameson, *American* 74)—antagonism does not designate predefined groups facing off; rather, like the Real, it is "an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing; it is only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them; it prevents the closure of the social field" (Žižek, *Sublime* 184).

If antagonism cannot be experienced in itself, it *can* be located by visible disruptions to the socio-symbolic system in which we locate ourselves. The classic example is the symptom, which Žižek traces back to Marx and relates to Derrida's specter.³³ Lindau's missing hand is a symptom in this sense. Laclau and Mouffe borrow Lacan's redefinition of the symptom as metaphor: "antagonism . . . situates itself within the limits of language, and can only exist as the disruption of it—that is, as metaphor" (111). Indeed, metaphor tears

³³ See Žižek, *Sublime Object* 3-55; and "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology" 26.

two unrelated signifiers away from their normal chain of signification and creates a new meaning from their equivalence, though there is always the possibility for the resignification of these elements in yet another chain of meaning. Jameson makes similar claims about allegory as an experience of failure. From Walter Benjamin, he borrows the idea of allegory as a collection of objects in “a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence” (Jameson, *Marxism* 71). Any attempt to place these objects back in their human, historical context is bound to uncover “breaks, gaps, discontinuities, and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds” (“Metaphor to Allegory” 25). Drawing on the classic definition of allegory as an extended metaphor, we can relate these theories: antagonism must be approached indirectly, as an extended metaphor or allegory that both points to and enacts the breakdown of the socio-symbolic system of differences. Examples from our novels include: James’s rewriting his metaphor for artistic production as an antagonism between a male canvas and female embroiderers in the production of urban space (chapter 2); Cahan’s boxing allegory relating class antagonism, assimilation, and divorce (chapter 3); Wharton’s star-crossed lovers being likened to the ghosts of time (chapter 4); and Chesnutt’s Dr. Miller seeing a black body in the streets during the Wilmington riot and knowing “what it signified” (chapter 5).

For Jameson and Žižek, the class struggle is the un-representable “absent cause” constitutive of our alienated existence in capitalist society (which Sartre reframes as the realm of scarcity), undermining desire and containment at every turn.³⁴ Laclau, Mouffe, and

³⁴ Jameson describes Sartre’s late-career turn to the language of scarcity in terms that align a Lacanian reading of desire with the Marxian analysis of historical preconditions: “[when] man’s emptiness takes the form of *need*, the resistance of the world to man is now defined in terms of *scarcity*. For scarcity is precisely the unanalyzable starting point, the contingent datum, of the world in which we exist” (*Marxism* 232-233). Jameson later names this “The Real,” “that which resists desire, that bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breakup of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfillment” (*Political* 183-184).

Rancière reject class essentialism. Political identities are created in the act of articulating any us/them relation, disrupting the differential and often oppressive relations in which the subject had been (mis)placed. When done in the name of radical democracy, a subordinated person or group challenges a hegemonic totality—the commonsense “map” of sociopolitical life (where it starts/ends and whom it encompasses)—by announcing and embodying society’s non-coincidence with itself. There is no pure, essentialist core to political activity—it can crop up at any time/place, to be measured by the warping effect it has on the who, what, when, and where of politics. The Lacanian underpinnings of *Hegemony* were discussed above. As for Rancière, Jodi Dean explains that his conception of the *demos*—“the people” who become the subjects of democratic politics through a process he calls subjectification—“does not designate a subset of persons . . . that can be empirically indicated.” Rather, it

names the gap, division or antagonism that marks the non-identity of any ordering with its own components. The Lacanian term for [this] . . . would then be *objet petit a*, an impossible, formal object produced as the excess of a process or relation, a kind of gap that incites or annoys, the missingness or not-quite-rightness that calls out to us. . . . [P]olitical subjectification is itself a disidentification and registration of a gap. . . . There are various politicizations, various mobilizations and subjectifications that call out to and organize different convictions and interests. (Dean, “Communist” 94)

Many of these theorists (Dean included, Sartre excluded) have recently been drawn into the adjacent fields of urban studies/planning and architecture to explain and harness the energies released by contemporary urban political movements like Occupy and Arab Spring (2011).³⁵ Urban politics, in these accounts, must be rearticulated outside the familiar liberal variants of the Tocquevillian association or the Habermasian public sphere by emphasizing antagonism (conflict, dissent, power struggles) over consensus and rationality. Instead of there being pre-defined, acceptable identities and spaces for politics, political subjects and spaces can be created at virtually any time and place. In Dan Webb’s terms, “*cities* facilitate

³⁵ See Davidson and Iveson; Lahijj; Purcell; Swyngedouw; and Webb.

the capacity for millions of people to organize and articulate themselves as ‘the people’” (26). From Baron von Haussmann’s supposedly barricade-proof Parisian boulevards to the evacuation of Zuccotti Park, however, cities are also sites where radical politics are squashed—proactively or retroactively, but always imperfectly—to ensure the smooth, conflict-free circulation of people and capital that Rancière calls the police order. I hope to bring to bear on literary studies the linkage between urban space, antagonism, and politics that has influenced such a wide swath of urban theorists, planners, and architects.

To this end, I liken my use of the aforementioned theorists of antagonism to Jameson’s model of allegorical “transcoding,” which names the rewriting of philosophical concepts and ideas under a shared interpretive horizon. As I will discuss in chapter 3, using Cahan’s transition from orthodox Marxism to post-Marxism as an example, Jameson’s transcoding requires a “master narrative” (the Marxian narrative of History) not just to justify the process itself but to give a final, proper place to various “codes” or collected objects from different historical moments. Laclau and Mouffe are opposed to such “master narratives” but they suggest a similar operation when they name Marxian socialism a development within the discursive context of the democratic revolution.³⁶ Taking the democratic revolution as the “master code” means that there are no right answers and thus no promised unification of democratic ideals and realities, democratic theory and practice.

What can the realist novel accomplish, then, faced with the constitutive fact of social antagonism in a society defined by the discursive matrix that is the democratic revolution? In one of his nonfiction essays, Chesnutt similarly asks, after listing examples of race antagonism: “What is it then that we want and can help bring about?” (*Essays* 253). When the world is separated into “classes” or “castes,” violence is often the result. But if each party

³⁶ See Laclau and Mouffe 140.

views the other as an “individual citizen” with democratic rights, the results might be different: “Every effort to segregate and to stamp as different or inferior a class of people redounds to the injury of the class less fortunate. The Negro cannot compete with white people, as a class. As individuals they can make such a showing as their deserts may qualify them for” (253). In a relation of oppression, one side has power over the other but each sets a limit on the other’s happiness and development. When the Other is viewed as a citizen with rights, however, a real competition begins. This is no dream of liberal consensus but rather the beginning of an adversarial competition where there had once been oppression.

This is a crucial feature shared by all the novels in this study: the transformation of antagonism into *agonism*. The theoretical background for the latter concept is Mouffe’s engagement with Carl Schmitt, who claims that equality is shared by “friends,” while “enemies” are not equal and must be kept out of the group of equals. Antagonists have nothing to say to each other—all that is possible is war. Agonism provides “channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but an adversary” (*Democratic* 103).³⁷ Adversaries “have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. But [they] disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion” (102).

³⁷ “[T]he term agonism comes from the Greek *agon*, meaning conflict or strife,” but, as Mark Wenman points out, it has taken on new life in the work of Mouffe, Hannah Arendt, William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, James Tully, and others (4). There might be some question, then, why this dissertation focuses on only one of these theorists. In answer, I would point to the moment when Wenman articulates why he will *part* from Mouffe in his theorization of agonism as a global phenomenon: “Mouffe has rejected arguments for cosmopolitanism outright, suggesting instead that we should focus on renewing democracy at the national and regional level as the best way to challenge the negative impact of the processes of globalisation” (xv). The realists similarly thought of democracy in local/regional and national contexts, which is why Mouffe is appropriate here.

There has been some discussion, within the context of political philosophy, over the degree to which Mouffe's solo work constitutes either an extension or a repudiation of the conception of antagonisms as experience of the "failure" of "the social" in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.³⁸ Indeed, Schmitt offers a conservative, positivistic account of an antagonism that can be figured as a line drawn in the sand or a walled city; whereas in Laclau and Mouffe's work, antagonism expressly does *not* indicate two self-consistent, internally whole and coherent groups facing off. Yet Mouffe claims that *Hegemony* provided the "theoretical terrain" of her later thinking of antagonism (*Democratic* 101). She turns Schmitt's friend/enemy relation into an ontological category of human behavior, making it a possibility in any social relation, always-already subverting a liberal belief in consensus. Power and violence are thus spectral possibilities for all encounters in a liberal democracy, retaining the specifications for antagonism in *Hegemony*. Mouffe simply transcodes Schmitt's antagonism into the discursive context of liberal-democratic society.

The realists, I think, would have understood things in this way—not (or not only) by any exceptional powers of political imagination but by (or also by) experiencing the sociopolitical realities of postbellum urban America. The rise of a Social Darwinian brand of white supremacy after the Civil War provided a clear-cut example of the friend/enemy relation operating within the context of liberal-democratic pluralism. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* explores how conservative discourse tries and fails to draw the entire world into unequal camps (white/black). The rise of a powerful black middle class in Wilmington, North Carolina, exposes the failure of this discourse since there are bodies and spaces that refuse to fit their hierarchical vision of the world. The white supremacists experience this failure just as Laclau and Mouffe predicted, as an "identity crisis" (113).

³⁸ See Wenman 180-198.

It is not Mouffe's transcoding of antagonism, then, that constitutes something new on the level of political or aesthetic theory (we can add Schmitt's name to the list of theorists above). Rather, it is her conception of the transformation of antagonism into agonism—when the enemy becomes “an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (*Democratic* 102). On the one hand, agonism is another name for hegemony: it is a war of position instead of a war for existence; it is “us” (radical democrats) versus “them” (neoliberals) instead of friend (those in the nation state) and enemy (those outside). The political thrust of *Hegemony* required the discursive *proliferation* of antagonisms; however, in Mouffe's work, agonism is an attempt to *contain* antagonism. In her words, agonism “consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations” (*Democratic* 101).

Domesticating and defusing: is agonism not then an ideological “strategy of containment” in Kaplan's Jamesonian sense? In the next section, I will differentiate agonism from the Kaplan/Jameson model *and* show how the realists critique the aesthetic and political limits of face-to-face conversation. In other words, agonism is not the be-all and end-all of the American realist novel but is rather a waystation on the road to acknowledging and working through the effects of antagonism in an increasingly pluralistic urban society.

III. From Antagonism to Agonism and Beyond

Agonistic debates between characters might be the most recognizable feature of the American realist novel. As Howells stipulates, it is best for characters to be distinguished as “types” instead of “classes” (*Selected* 63); and one of the defining features of a realist “type” is his or her political identity, which takes shape as a character defends a position against a political opponent in a debate. The examples are numerous: the tense dinner party to celebrate a literary magazine's success in Howells's *Hazard*, where Lindau the socialist and

Dryfoos the Social Darwinist square off on the topic of strikebreaking; the debates between two cousins in James's *The Bostonians*, the Southern male chauvinist Basil Ransom and the Bostonian feminist Olive Chancellor; or, in Cahan's *Yekl*, the Orthodox Jewish immigrant, Gitl, warning her Americanized, philandering husband that a wronged wife has rights and can sue for divorce in the U.S. Yet there is also something undeniably problematic about such agonistic relations, no matter how heated they get.

To begin with, agonistic dialogue rarely occurs in the streets or in the public square but rather in offices and apartments. Made into a formal component of the realist novel, Kaplan would want to stress, debates between characters represent the containment of antagonisms "out there," in the background of the text (the space of everyday urbanism), within the foreground of domestic interiors. I would like to reorient our understanding of agonism by viewing it as a variant of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the chronotope of the parlor in European realism: "In salons and parlors the webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and finally—this is where *dialogues* happen . . . revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes" (246). It is here we find "the interweaving of petty, private intrigues with political and financial intrigues, the interpenetration of state with boudoir secrets, of historical sequences with the everyday and biographical sequences" (247). With this description, we can start to see how the channeling of background into foreground, of antagonism into agonism, need not be ideological in the sense of containing or cordoning off—it can also mark the interpenetration of inside and outside, public and private, background and foreground. In Kaplan's reading, Howells follows the strategy of his main characters, the Marches, as they try to find the "line" between respectable middle class life and urban strife: "Just as the Marches cordon off a domestic space against the teeming streets, the narrative distinguishes a colony of interrelated characters in the foreground

against a background of fragmented objects and characterless masses” (52). In my reading, by contrast, authors should be distinguished from their characters. For realist authors, antagonisms “out there” in the city penetrate the dialogues and destinies of individual characters (qua political types), giving them a spark of energy and sociopolitical significance even if those same characters wish to re-contain or dampen or ignore the antagonistic relations of urban life.

At the same time, however, the realists expose the limits of agonistic dialogue to shore up the plurality of other possible voices and identities worthy of novelistic and political representation; after all, “relations stop nowhere” (James, *Literary* 1041). No matter how many named characters clash in tense debates, there is *still* a whole world “out there” not participating and not being heard. Open antagonism and tense face-to-face debates are, in some sense, the Scylla and Charybdis of the realist novel: if one wants to avoid open warfare to engage in dialogical agonism, the reality is that someone will be excluded, prevented from fully participating. Rather than giving up, the realists keep attempting to chart this perilous aesthetic and political path, inviting different kinds of characters into the dialogical arena—characters whose personal and political identities are formed in the very act of engaging in debate.

Wharton and Chesnutt alert our attention to another way to experience the limit of the agonistic character system: sometimes agonism never gets started. Polite society, as Howells states and Wharton more than anybody bears out, “hates a scene” (“Equality” 64). When Newland Archer broaches the topic of divorce at a dinner party in *The Age of Innocence*, his words “fall like a bombshell in the pure and tranquil atmosphere of the Archer dining-room. . . . [T]he young man, himself mindful of the bad taste of discussing such intimate matters in public, hastily branched off” (Wharton, *Age* 87). Chesnutt’s Southern characters

are not so polite and the issues in the Jim Crow South are more pressing, but a similar evacuation of agonism is at play in *The Marrow of Tradition*. One of Chesnutt's white supremacists, faced with a "slandrous" editorial written by a black newspaper editor, states: "To meet words with words upon such a subject would be to acknowledge the equality of the negro and his right to discuss or criticise the conduct of the white people" (*Marrow* 148). Mouffe's agonism requires that the interlocutors acknowledge the "right" of their opponent to defend their position. If there are barriers to this acknowledgement, as there are in the Jim Crow South and Old New York, then an adversarial dialogue would never start.

Wharton and Chesnutt both invent novel ways of making voices and bodies speak and appear so that they can be heard and seen. These are issues that Rancière's political philosophy directly takes up and helps us rethink. Rancière will take a prominent place in the last two chapters of this study—on Wharton and Chesnutt—precisely so we can understand how an author can overcome the limitations of agonism by retooling antagonism as the sudden appearance, and just-as-rapid disappearance, of a living, breathing political being capable of speech where there had been mere noise or silence. Rancière compares radical-democratic politics and literature/aesthetics—his most consistent example is the European realist novel—as forces that invent new ways of speaking, hearing, and feeling the world around us. The realist novel "does" politics by reimagining the perceptual world: it opens the novel to everyday subjects/situations; its impersonal, free-floating style exposes readers to the swirl of atoms that make up a life; and its author/narrator deciphers the "mute speech" of bodies and objects that populate the setting—often the background—of a novel.

An attentive reader will note the lurking presence of Rancière throughout this study, not just the Wharton and Chesnutt chapters. This is because, along with Mouffe but in a more directly aesthetic register, Rancière will help us push against Jameson's insistence that

democratic values or concepts (e.g., equality, freedom, the people) are nothing but ideological mirages produced by capitalism itself.³⁹ Although Jameson wants to rescue utopian impulses (e.g., the figuration of collectivity) baked into the ideology of literary realism and other mass art forms, this process only highlights the failure to imagine or describe, let alone realize, the radically new. For Rancière, Marxism is the quintessence of “metapolitics”: the keeping at bay of radical politics in the oscillation between the critique of bourgeois democracy as illusory and the promise of a “real” democracy that never seems to arrive. I prefer to think of Rancière’s aesthetics and/as politics as providing a representational third gear that can reach the nameless and forgotten bodies and voices “out there”: the *demos* (the subject of democratic politics as well as “democracy in literature”) or the “part with no part” (that is, with no part in the ruling of the community and/or in the agonistic character system). The antagonistic aesthetic and political appearance of these voices/bodies can productively disrupt and reenergize texts that otherwise adhere to the spatio-temporal, linguistic, and/or political limits of agonistic face-to-face conversation.

In *Hazard*, as my first chapter will illustrate, Howells momentarily reaches this once-invisible and silent population when the Marches revel in New York’s elevated trains. I reserve the term “affect” to describe this new way of seeing, feeling, and hearing the world “out there.” In reaching this world, however, Howells’s realist project runs aground, aesthetically and politically: aesthetically because he dissolves plot and narration into the bodily experience of the here-and-now, paving the way for the molecular preoccupations of modernism; and politically because he is unable to make affective immersion the center of a radical-democratic platform. This could be explained by two of Rancière’s more contentious claims: realism is part of the same aesthetic regime as modernism; and while literature does

³⁹ See Jameson, “Postmodernism and the Market” 279-280.

something akin to political demonstration by rearranging the perceptual world, it does not form new collective subjectivities but rather challenges singular subjectivities. I treat Howells's failure as an opening for other realists, rather than an aesthetico-political imperative. By giving voice and body to the excluded, can the realist novel *as such* represent in its pages, and/or produce among its readers, new political identities that name and combat the multifaceted sites of oppression in postbellum cities? If so, we could speak of the realist novel as creating a radical-democratic, counter-hegemonic bloc for an urban era dominated by naïve liberalism and Social Darwinian liberalism. I close this introduction with a brief account of the rest of my chapters and how the four authors therein answer this challenge.

James, the subject of my second chapter, is less concerned with real-world change than with highlighting the temptation, felt on both sides of the political spectrum, to ignore troubling remainders and “resolve” an antagonism on the level of agonistic debate. Turning to the city of his youth in *The Bostonians* (1886) to show the woman question as a product of democratic social conditions, James found Boston difficult to map, geographically and socially. His solution is threefold. First, he references the local reason Boston is hard to map (the filling of the Back Bay of the Charles River). Then, he names the antagonism behind the growing city, which is the tension between male and female roles in the production and usage of urban space. Finally, he shows the process by which this antagonism motivates an agonistic debate between two cousins. Ransom and Olive proffer two “solutions” to this antagonism, which intervene at different urban scales: architecture (Harvard's Memorial Hall) and the female voice (Verena Tarrant). Memorial Hall celebrates Harvard's Northern soldiers but causes Ransom, a Confederate veteran, to forget “the whole question of sides and parties” (189). Similarly, when Verena gives a speech on equality, her voice “reduced the company to unanimity” (206). These solutions are not fixed: Ransom reconfigures the

memorial as a paean to masculinity and Verena can promote either Ransom or Olive's divergent positions. In the end, Ransom "wins" as Verena deserts a feminist rally, leaving Olive to fall prey to a disappointed, increasingly agitated crowd. The closing moments show James's main lesson: social antagonism will never be resolved.

Cahan believed that Howells and the other realists overlooked the fact that the antagonism between labor and capital would be resolved only by the ruinous march of capitalism. Yet, Cahan was dismayed when fellow members of the Second International brushed off his proposal to condemn anti-Semitism in the party. Ethnic identities, he realized, were not counted or heard within party debates, a sign that class struggle would not automatically yield the workers' unity needed for revolution. In my third chapter, I argue that Cahan's English-language novella *Yekl* (1896) dramatizes the tension between ethnic identity and class identity in New York's Lower East Side. Cahan introduces the Marxian master narrative through an allegory relating the title character's sweatshop labor to boxing. Desiring to rise above his class like a successful boxer, Yekl (he goes by Jake) unintentionally adopts the orthodox Marxist position on assimilation. This position is challenged in agonistic fashion by his wife Gitl, who wants to mold a Jewish identity in urban America, which she achieves by divorcing her husband. However, in the last chapter, "A Defeated Victor," Cahan folds Gitl's identity back into the Marxian dialectic (the loser wins and the winner loses). It is only in his later novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), and in his work as editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, I claim, where Cahan locates a Jewish identity that is aligned with socialist party in its attack on capitalist injustices but also retains the autonomy to explore uniquely Jewish issues on the Lower East Side. A subtle reference to the *Forward* in the pages of *Levinsky* secures realism's place in naming and fostering the new Jewish Left, blurring the

boundary between fiction and reality, aesthetics and politics. The moment is small enough, however, not to pose any formal problems for Cahan's realism.

The fourth chapter considers the aesthetic and political implications of a key moment in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), in which Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer visit the Metropolitan Museum near Central Park. Though this impeccably researched novel is set in the 1870s, the museum did not move to its location in Central Park until the 1880s. To explain this deliberate anachronism, I turn to Rancière's conception of politics and the police. Politics, or the egalitarian promise of democracy as such, is antagonistic to the police, which distributes people, places, and roles within a well-mapped hierarchy. Old New York, in my reading, is an example of the police. When Ellen's love for Archer is made visible in the museum, Wharton enacts a redistribution of the sensible on behalf of all those who have been forgotten in and by time. The anachronistic setting shows Wharton bucking the conventions of realism to represent the ghosts of time. I speculate whether anachronistic love moved her readers to resist gender oppressions even after democracy seemed to "arrive" with women's suffrage in 1920, the same year *Age* came out.

Charles Chesnutt, my final author, is very clear about his aesthetic and political aims as a realist author: to advance black civil rights through literature, he writes in his journal, the author must first "mine" the opposition's viewpoint and then subtly prepare readers for "social recognition and equality" (*Journals* 140). I follow this double purpose in Chesnutt's masterwork, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). I show that the construction of "race antagonism" in both white supremacist discourse (newspapers, speeches) and spatial practices (segregation, riot activity) is the result of an identity crisis brought on by the visible successes of Wilmington's black middle class. Chesnutt also prepares readers for "social recognition and equality" (*Journals* 140) through a plotline involving the half-black Janet

Miller, who wants to be *recognized* by her white half-sister and near twin Olivia. For Olivia to recognize Janet, I claim, she must see and hear a fellow human being, an equal, which she refuses to do. Olivia's recognition of Janet comes in the last scene of the novel, when she hears how Janet has been "foully wronged": "you . . . left me nameless all my life!" (*Marrow* 195). In a radical moment, she identifies herself with the nameless victims of the riot.

I save Chesnutt for last because he overcomes two problems in Rancière's conception of politics, problems on which my other authors run aground. First, Rancière wishes to combine realism and modernism while distinguishing between aesthetics and political demonstration, something that Chesnutt gets around by collapsing Janet's search for recognition and his readers' struggle for "social recognition and equality." If Olivia and the reader find themselves agreeing with the radically realist (because true, confirmable) and radical-democratic idea that Janet is not different from Olivia, Chesnutt has done his job. The other problem is on the side of political demonstration. If it is a temporary time-place wherein new subjects suddenly emerge, how can there be any substantive social or political change? If Rancière challenges Mouffe's antagonism-agonism relay by keeping "the people" as a category irreducible to liberal interest politics, then Chesnutt points to a more politically pragmatic method like Mouffe's to return the favor and patch over this problem in Rancière. Black civil rights, for Chesnutt, is an autonomous force within the fight for greater social and political equality in the liberal-democratic state. These two poles draw energy from each other: the autonomous group is strengthened by its reference to the equality promised to all "men" in a democracy; and the radical-democratic bloc of groups referencing these same promises is strengthened by the addition of a new voice and body that gets to count as equal.

Chapter 1

“Feel Like Populace”:

Public Transportation and Affective Contagion in Howellsian Realism

“People who want to understand democracy should spend less time in the library with Aristotle and more time on the buses and in the subway”—Simeon Strunsky, *No Mean City* (1944)

In *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Fredric Jameson makes a startling claim about the origins of European realism: the body—its range of feelings and sensations (sight, smell, touch, taste)—entered the works of Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, Leo Tolstoy, and others as the narrative opponent of emotions. Jameson thus historicizes a postmodern literary-critical term, affect: “it will be appropriate to associate the rise of affect with the emergence of the phenomenological body in language and representation; and to historicize a competition between the system of named emotions and the emergence of nameless bodily states” (Jameson, *Antinomies* 32).¹ Affect’s opposite narrative number, “the system of named emotions,” is a list of emotions akin to “the system of colors [ROYGBIV]” (29). One is also reminded of charts with illustrations of emotions (fear, love, guilt, etc.), the idea being that our emotional state can be approximated by these word/picture combinations. Affects—the smells, sounds, tastes, and feeling registered by the body—muddle the self/other distinction propping up named emotions: they refer not to my personal feeling but a sort of free-floating, sliding, autonomous mood—ranging “from the depressive to the manic, from gloominess to ecstasy” (42)—that can be picked up by anybody (35-36).²

¹ I follow Jameson in this “very local and restricted, practical use of the term ‘affect’” (29). However, it is worth pointing out that there has been a very productive turn to affect in Americanist criticism. A scarcely exhaustive list includes: Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011); Christopher Castiglia’s *Interior States* (2008); Peter Coviello’s *Intimacy in America* (2005); and Dana Luciano’s *Arranging Grief* (2007).

² A great example of affect comes from *War and Peace*: “When Prince Andrew left the palace he felt that all the interest and happiness the victory [by the Russians over the French, in 1805] had afforded him had now been left in the indifferent hands of the Minister of War and the polite adjutant” (qtd. in Jameson, *Antinomies* 84).

“[T]he very force and pungency of the realist writing” in Jameson’s account lies in “the irrevocable antagonism between” affect and named emotions, which can take many different forms (11). For instance, affect and named emotions address two kinds of temporality that a writer can draw upon. Affect is the domain of the here-and-now, the “perpetual present,” while named emotions are on the side of narration, the well-constructed plot, and a character’s pre-determined destiny (28). The waxing and waning of bodily intensities in the pure present strain identity, narration, and language itself to their breaking points. The most famous theorization of this tension is Henry James’s “antagonism” between showing (scene, picture) and telling (narration, event) (22). This is one of Jameson’s few references to American-born authors.

If his narrative about the birth of realism from the *récit* (tale) and its death into the scenic preoccupations of modernism were applied to the American literary scene, it would need to account for W.D. Howells, who defended literary realism in *The Atlantic* and *Harper’s* but saw his star fade near the end of his long life (born in 1837, he died in 1920). In a “Roundtable” in the *Journal of American Studies* meant to address and correct the dearth of American authors in *Antinomies*, contributor Mark Storey makes this point:

The other obvious [missing] name is William Dean Howells, not just the editorial gatekeeper of American realism through the late nineteenth century but also its chief practitioner. It would have been interesting to see Jameson account for Howells, whose best novels—*The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890)—would seem to both reinforce some of the claims being made and offer a socially and aesthetically committed version of realism in its American context. (Bennett et al. 1081-1082).

This chapter will be just such an attempt to test Jameson’s account by applying it to Howells and his aesthetico-political defense of realism as “democracy in literature” (*Selected* 62).

One of Howells’s most programmatic statements on realism is fatefully split between narrative destiny and an affective embodiment in the flux of everyday life:

In life [the realist] finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character . . . He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than a scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives. (*Selected* 302)

On the one hand, the realist classifies and tells of individual destinies like a scientist who places no taboo on possible subjects; on the other, he participates in a Whitmanesque celebration of the embodied soul that feels “the equality of things” and the “unity of men.”³

I will historicize Howells’s deployment of affect by tracking not only its antagonism with named emotions across his oeuvre but also the preexisting artistic forms (Whitman’s poetry, Tolstoy’s novels) and the social/historical constraints (class antagonism and the development of public transportation technologies) that make affect thinkable for Howells. His evolving realist project, I claim, is defined by his attempt to *show* the emergence of a radical-democratic public—or “populace,” to use a phrase from *Hazard* (360)—in the here-and-now of urban-industrial capitalism⁴ by registering an instance of collective enjoyment in the bodily equality made possible by public transportation. The price to pay is great: it means dissolving realist narration and utopian politics in the “perpetual present” of affect. Furthermore, as Howells came to realize with a melancholic sense of dismay, even the momentary enjoyment of equality on the train car presupposes an entire world “out there”

³ This description of Howells’s literary democracy opens up possible connections between Jameson’s antinomies and Rancière’s politics of aesthetics: the equality of subjects; the mute speech of bodies, deciphered by the author; and the swirl of atoms that make everything equal in the end. In an interview, Jameson confirmed that his notion of affect is close to Deleuzian “intensity” or haecceity (“Revisiting 152)—“a relationship of movement and rest between molecules or particles, the power to affect and to be affected” (qtd. in Rancière, *Politics* 62)—which is also the source of Rancière’s “molecular equality” (*Politics* 25). Realism, in both accounts, (d)evolves as it manages its tensions and achieves provisional solutions. We can thus transcode Rancière’s terms into Jameson’s: democratic subjects and mute speech are compatible with named emotions (i.e., they are narratable), while molecular equality is a version of affect because it resists narration.

⁴ For all its collective potential, affect for Jameson is a method for registering the bourgeois body under capitalism. Overthrowing the capitalist means of production would “ge[t] rid of a whole range of intensities and gratifications in terms of which we individual subjects of late capitalism have become accustomed to defining our own ‘identity’” (*Jameson on Jameson* 34).

not participating and not feeling the same way. How and why Howells learned to stop worrying and register what the “equality of things and the unity of men” feels like in an antagonistic urban-industrial reality is the subject of this chapter.

I. Riding Nahant Ferry

As Storey implies in the “Roundtable” on Jameson’s *Antinomies*, the twin presence of named emotions and affect in Howells’s oeuvre can be traced back to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Early in this novel, Tom Corey, a member of Boston’s social elite, starts working for the Midwestern transplant and new millionaire Silas Lapham. Lapham asks the young man to dine at his family’s summer home in Nahant, Massachusetts. On the ferry, Lapham claims that the human face does not “tell” anything:

The astonishing thing to me is not what a face tells, but what it don’t tell. When you think of what a man is, or a woman is, and what most of ‘em have been through before they get to be thirty; it seems as if their experience would burn right through. But it don’t . . . I don’t suppose it was meant we should know what was in each other’s minds. It would take a man out of his own hands. As long as he’s in his own hands, there’s some hopes of his doing something with himself; but if a fellow has been found out . . . it’s pretty much all up with him. (Howells, *Lapham* 79-80)

Amy Kaplan contrasts this moment with Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856). I will address the specifics of her reading in a moment. First, I want to suggest that, along with Charles Baudelaire in Jameson’s account,⁵ Whitman first “discovered” the body’s intensities amid the urban crowd, providing a roadmap for its insertion into realist narration.

The temporality Jameson associates with affect is very much in play in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” The universal properties of the commute—the sense of being in between home and work, daydreaming while looking out onto the majestic city—allows Whitman not only to understand but to feel the same way as a future commuter: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so

⁵ See Jameson, *Antinomies* 32-34; and *Modernist* 228.

many generations hence, / Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt / Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd” (*Leaves* 136). The commute is a bodily experience shared in an eternal present. The feeling of such an experience erupts on the surface, blurring the distinction between self and other: “Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, / You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul / About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest aromas” (*Leaves* 139).

Lapham, meanwhile, finds it impossible to read the feelings of the people around him, which comes as a relief: “No, sir. I don’t want to know people through and through” (Howells, *Lapham* 80). The narrator then interrupts Lapham to assure his readers that “[t]he greater part of the crowd on board—and, of course, the boat was crowded—looked as if they might not only be easily but safely known” (80). The narrator begins codifying the kinds of people all around them, distancing himself from the crowd by deciphering what Jacques Rancière would call the “mute speech” of these bodies. What is in question, here, is whether “experience” can burn through to the surface, as it does in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (80). Unlike Lapham, the narrator answers, “yes,” but he strikes a very different note than Whitman, who feels at one with his fellow riders, present and future, as they bask in the urban landscape. Howells’s narrator typifies the experiences shining through these passengers: they are seeking fun or relief from city life because they are of the class of people who can afford to do so. Rancière claims that “mute speech” produces a form of symptomatic reading: the body “tells” of a time and place in history.⁶ Kaplan points out that in contrast with both Whitman, who first finds the crowd “enigmatic and threatening” but then ecstatically joins it, and Lapham, to whom “the crowd remains illegible,” Howells’s “narrator finds the crowd to be an open book, easily, safely, and monotonously known” (40,

⁶ As we will see in chapter 4, Wharton and her characters are experts in this kind of symptomatic reading.

41). A system of classification into which bodies and experiences can be safely placed wins out over the loss of self in affective transmission.

Next, Lapham nervously calls attention to “the people thickly packed on the pier, and under strong restraint of locks and gates, to prevent them from rushing on board the boat and possessing her for the return trip before she had landed her Nantasket passengers” (81). The feeling experienced by the crowd, if it were named, would be “excitement” or “impatience,” but it is not named. Between the image of a “thickly packed” crowd and the restraints holding them back we are *shown* what group excitement looks like. Whitman utilizes a similar technique: “Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet / haste with the hasting current” (*Leaves* 139). The palpable fear, in *Lapham*, is that this crowd will overtake the boat before it lands at the pier, thus overflowing the narrator’s classification system with the presence of unruly, unclassifiable bodies.

As if to avoid the aesthetic and political dangers of the crowd, Howells has Lapham recognize his daughter, Penelope, standing amongst those threatening to overload the pier: “There’s my girl!” (81). If the crowd threatens the narrator’s classification system, Penelope restores it. From this moment forward, Penelope slowly moves to the forefront of Tom Corey’s consciousness (he’s in love with her). While Penelope moves to the forefront of novelistic attention as well, she does not become a main character but joins a crowded field of secondary characters giving shape to the rise and fall of Silas Lapham (Mrs. Lapham, Irene Lapham, the Coreys, Silas’s ex-partner Mr. Rogers, and his typist Miss Dewey).

According to Jameson the “discovery” of affect around midcentury had a warping effect on character systems in the realist novel. In *War and Peace* (1865-1869), for example, the narrative becomes distracted by this or that minor character, which can only interrupt the unfolding of Tolstoy’s history of Russia between 1805 and 1812 and the entwined destiny of

his characters across that timeframe. By the time we get to Benito Pérez Galdós and George Eliot, secondary characters populate the space once occupied solely by the protagonist.

Novels are no longer concerned with the destiny of heroic protagonists but instead focus on what other genres would consider minor, unimportant characters engaged in decidedly non-heroic, quotidian situations. Following Erich Auerbach, Jameson calls the latter the realm of the everyday. Yet “the triumph of the everyday” is one side of a two-headed development in realism and bourgeois society alike, the other being “social equality” (*Antinomies* 109).

Strangely, these are “two distinct and opposing trends or tendencies which miraculously complement each other” (108). One is left wondering: why are the everyday and social equality opposed and how do they then go about complementing each other?

The answer to the first question, as one might expect, is that they exist on opposite sides of the named emotions-affect divide. The everyday is on the side of affect and it is thus in a strict sense un-narratable (*Antinomies* 142-143). Social equality is on the side of named emotions, along with destiny, telling, and narration. The answer to the second question (how do they complement each other?) is as follows: it is the fate of protagonists to “renounce their right to be protagonists of the novel and now cheerfully or with resignation accept their democratic future in the new world of secondary characters as such” (112). By submitting characters to this democratic destiny, social equality invests the everyday with a narrative and political arc that it otherwise lacks. Social equality is, in other words, an imaginary solution to a more fundamental tension, which on the literary level is between affect and named emotions but extends deeper for Jameson, to the disjuncture between existential reality and the totality of class relations in which we are all enmeshed.

Moving from the recognition of Penelope on the docks to Howells's theory of realism more generally, we will notice that this genre opens the pages of literature to a class of people previously ignored by great literature:

[We] invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common, and to the portrayal in every art of those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity, if he would thrive in the new order of things. The talent that is robust enough to front the every-day world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things along worthy of painting or carving or writing. The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art . . . (Howells, *Selected* 99)

The American author must be “robust” enough to face the dangerous power of the everyday, where “care-worn” bodies reside. When it comes time to write, the everyday is made narratable by aligning it with the promises of democracy, confirming Jameson's thesis.

Kaplan traces this impulse to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the second novel mentioned by Storey as bearing out Jameson's conclusions. Among other things, the novel is about a middle-aged couple, Basil and Isabel March, who move from Boston to New York City when the former is offered an opportunity to edit a literary magazine. The overly long and seemingly pointless description of their search for an apartment in New York, Kaplan argues, is a way to find and reify the line separating the subject of realist representation—the “knowable community” (47) of characters that visit each other in various Manhattan apartments—from the unreal, indescribable class strife going on “out there,” in the everyday lives of city people. This narrative solution is borrowed from Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which exposed the execrable living conditions of New York's poor to bolster the importance of “middle-class domesticity” (46). To mark the need for such a distinction in novels, Kaplan argues, Howells registers the unpleasant bodily sensations that bubble up when “the other half” approaches: the search for an apartment “is undercut by the sensory

assault of the streets” (49). Once it is located, the line between genteel middle-class domesticity and “the other half”—between realist narration and the registration of affective states—must be policed constantly for the realist novel to exist as such. In those moments when “the other half” threatens to force its way back into the narrative, as when the Marches ride the elevated train (the El) and catch a glimpse of the everyday lives of people living in adjacent apartments, the line must reconstitute itself: “[the El] expands their perspective to otherwise inaccessible corners of urban life, and it violently dislocates what they see” (50). Kaplan qualifies Howells’s “democracy in literature” by pointing to the unruly bodies that are ignored in an “aesthetic of the common” that looks suspiciously like middle-class domestic life: “realism does not jar readers with the shock of otherness, it provides a recognizable mirror of their own world” (23). In other words, social equality only complements the everyday when one definition of the common (the bourgeois knowable community) is smuggled in for the more jarring commonplaces of everyday urbanism.

Applied to Howells, then, Jameson’s framework presents the Dean of American Letters as a genteel liberal who, like the titular heroine of his *Annie Kilburn* (1885), wants to help the poor but cannot stand their affective presence: “if she kept beyond the range of the powerful corporeal odour that enveloped them, she could experience the luxury of pity for them” (Howells, *Novels* 746-747). In his essay “Equality as the Basis of Good Society” (1895), Howells associates inequality with bad feelings: “If you meet an inferior or a superior, you are at once wretched . . . You spoil the joy of life for your inferior, just as your superior spoils the joy of life for you” (63-64). Žižek might call this the “theft of *jouissance*” by the Other. Jameson even theorizes that the feeling that the Other has stolen my *jouissance* “is at stake in class conflict and class struggle” (*American* 74). Howells finds that these feelings yield antagonisms *between* classes and equality *within* them, which carries overtones of Carl

Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction, the basis of Chantal Mouffe's conception of social antagonism.⁷ "Inferiority and superiority were intolerable to men, and so they formed themselves into classes, that inside of these classes they might have the peace, the comfort, of equality and each kept himself to his own class for that reason" (Howells, "Equality" 64).

Howells, we might conclude, represses the bodily existence of the Other to focus on equality within bourgeois circles. Indeed, in a now infamous 1886 *Harper's* column, Howells asks American writers to ignore social ills, which are the raw materials of European realism:

Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth; one might make Herr Most the hero of a labor-question romance with perfect impunity; and in a land where journeymen carpenters and plumbers strike for four dollars a day the sum of hunger and cold is certainly very small, and the wrong from class to class is almost inappreciable. We invite our novelists, therefore, to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than in the social interests. (*Selected* 35)

The timing of this column is odd to say the least. On May 4, 1886, an unknown assailant threw a bomb into a crowd in Chicago as police attempted to break up a peaceful rally related to an ongoing strike for an eight-hour workday. One officer died immediately, with seven more officers and four civilians perishing in the resulting scuffle. Seven anarchists were charged, convicted, and sentenced to death for inciting violence with their rhetoric. Howells became interested in the case in September. After the Supreme Court denied later appeals, Howells wrote a letter published in the *New York Tribune* (November, 1886), hoping to start a petition for clemency. The effort failed and Howells was roundly criticized for his position.⁸ Yet, in this column written between the riot and his public defense of the anarchists, Howells suggests that class warfare is all but nonexistent on American soil. Russ Castronovo notes Howells's head-scratching reference to the German anarchist Johann

⁷ See Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox* 36-57.

⁸ See Cady, *Realist* 70-73.

Most (“Herr Most”), whose recipe-book for homemade bombs, *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare* (1885), would become evidence in the trials.⁹ When Howells edited the “smiling aspects” passage for *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), he removed Most’s name but left his assessment of American happiness. Why and to what end?

As one will have guessed, the “smiling aspects of life” are intimately related to social equality. While inequality feels bad because the Other has stolen my joy, equality “is the only social joy, the only comfort” (Howells, “Equality” 63). On its own, “joy” could be mistaken for a named emotion. But it is best labeled an affect for two reasons. First, it is a group feeling (“social joy”) that exceeds and even muddles the individuated named emotion, “joy.” Second, this state is best described not by naming it but by registering its difference from the negative feelings on the other end of the spectrum, those associated with inequality.¹⁰

Howells’s example of the social joy in equality is the bourgeois dinner party, which would again seem to confirm the Jameson/Kaplan position. No guest is inherently above another, including the host. The comparison to minor characters and protagonists sharing pages in a novel is striking: “If you are asked to a house, the theory is that you are the equal of every person you meet there, and if you behave otherwise, you are vulgar” (63). Of course, the bad feelings associated with inequality are nowhere to be found: “good society, which always hates a scene, instinctively does its best to ignore inequality” (64). Howells, though, admits that bourgeois equality is “an *effect of equality*, and not equality itself, or equality merely for the moment. Perhaps it is because we know society to be merely a make-believe in its equality that so many society people regard a real equality as impossible, and are

⁹ See Castronovo 69.

¹⁰ Jameson’s affect is registered in the change of moods, from the low to the high or vice versa (*Antinomies* 42).

content to remain in the make-believe” (64, emphasis mine). Recognizing bourgeois social equality to be a mere pretense, Howells wants to make equality “real” again.

Equality will become “real” when “good society” spreads to the whole world, eradicating inequality (67). The utopian fantasy of universal equality appears to distance Howells from Schmitt, Mouffe, Žižek, and Jameson, for whom there will never be a state where Self and Other stop forming into opposing camps.¹¹ More in line with the nationalists and collectivists of his era (led by Edward Bellamy and Laurence Gronlund, respectively), Howells believed that capitalist society was developing toward greater social equality via the collective ownership of wealth.¹² In practice, though—and this is something we must wait to confirm in the analysis of specific texts—Howells learns a lesson hinted at in his description of the dinner party: “real” equality is always hopelessly local and temporary. “Real” equality is a utopia of the here-and-now, one that is liable to disappear at any moment.

Outside the home, where can one find a group that momentarily feels the social joy of human equality? What other space presupposes the equality of everybody therein, allowing for the “smiling aspects of life” to take hold? If affect finds its home in the urban everyday, then Howells realized that public transportation is not only the time of the everyday (the commute) but the perfect *space* for the positive feelings associated with equality. As Whitman shows, it is but one small step from a cautious, distanced awareness of all the socially-constructed differences in the crowd—where the narrator of *Lapham* stops—to an exuberance at the loss of personal identity that comes with the mass transport of bodies. Whitman, however, believed that the commute between Brooklyn and New York would look the same “[f]ifty years hence” (*Leaves* 136). Commuter ferries became outmoded

¹¹ This is a surprising admission for Jameson, made in *American Utopia* (2016). See pp. 66-77.

¹² See Howells’s positive review of Laurence Gronlund’s *Co-Operative Commonwealth* (1884) in *Selected* 86-89.

by the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, which had its own cable car. Howells understood that Whitman's ode to public transportation had to be updated. Thus, the ferry sequence in *Lapham* is only the beginning of a career-long engagement with public transportation and its relationship to the shared feelings of the urban crowd.

We have already come across a later point in this engagement, when Basil March daydreams on the El in *Hazard*. Here, I argue, Howells explodes the limits of his own realism by describing the everyday experience of riding the El as "gay," a term he repeats so much that it empties language of its power to name bodily states. The missing link, both in Howells's novelistic development and the development of transportation technologies, is the horse-car, which, we will see, is the site of a full-blown theory of affective entanglement in *The Minister's Charge* (1886), a Boston-based novel that borrows characters from *Lapham*.

By following the historical transformation from ferry to elevated transit as it unfolds across Howells's novels, we can uncover a representation of positive bodily feeling that *shows* rather than tells of situational equality. Yet the un-smiling aspects of American life, given narrative figuration as the crowd of striking streetcar workers in *Hazard*, haunt Howells's project like a bad dream. The strike is framed in terms of affect—the phrase "feel like populace" comes from this section of the novel (*Hazard* 360)—but it inspires decidedly negative bodily feelings Howells associates with inequality or a feeling of political impotence best approximated as melancholia. Since affect exists along a continuum, the feeling that the Other has stolen my joy and the related torpor of melancholia are complexly tied to Howells's search for shared joy in equality on public transportation. Jameson is thus right to say that the everyday and social equality complement each other; the problem is that he only focuses on one direction this relationship can go. It all depends on which end of the affective spectrum we are dealing with. Faced with the bodily feelings evoked by signs of

inequality (revulsion or melancholia), Howells mobilizes the equality of the drawing room as an ideological containment strategy (the Jameson/Kaplan thesis). Moving in the other direction, public transportation complements the ideal of equality, making it “real” by showing (rather than telling of) strangers feeling “gay” in a state of bodily equality.

II. The Boston Horse-Car and the Theory of Affective Contagion

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Minister's Charge*, Reverend David Sewell, a minor character in the former and the titular co-lead in the latter, has the distinct honor of giving voice to two doctrines that will remain central to the realist project that Howells began promoting in the pages of *Harper's* in 1886. On its own, this is enough to confirm Jameson's contention, which follows Alex Woloch's *The One Versus the Many* (2003), that in the great realist novels anybody has the right to become a protagonist. Sewell establishes his credentials in *Lapham* by providing a timely piece of advice. Visited by relative strangers, Silas and Persis Lapham, Sewell is asked if their daughter Penelope should give up on love because the family once thought the man in question (Tom Corey) preferred her sister. He responds with advice that they and, it turns out, Howells's readers, will not forget: “One suffer instead of three, if none is to blame? . . . That's sense, and that's justice. It's the economy of pain which naturally suggests itself, and which would insist upon itself, if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality” (Howells, *Lapham* 241). The sentimental novel, for both Sewell and Howells, teaches an imperative duty of self-sacrifice that only exists in its pages: “The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious” (*Lapham* 197). Howells implicitly holds up the realist novel as the form that can display the feelings, motives, and movements of ordinary people with social-scientific exactitude.

While Sewell plays the unlikely hero as a secondary character in *Lapham*, he occupies a morally dubious role as a co-lead, next to his “charge,” in *The Minister’s Charge*. After praising a young man’s bad poems while on a country vacation, Sewell feels responsible when this young man, Lemuel Barker, comes to Boston in search of prospective publishers. After leaving the dream of writing behind, Barker is too ashamed and too broke to go home. He goes through the crucible of homelessness, jail, the poor-house, and manual labor, returning home a broken man. Weaving in and out of Barker’s life throughout this process, Sewell obsesses over his moral and economic obligations to the boy. Reverend Sewell ultimately gives a stirring sermon on the topic “Complicity” with his “charge” in mind: “he preached the old Christ-humanity . . . and enforced again the lesson that no one for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy, for sickness or health, stood apart from his fellows, but each was bound to the highest and the lowest by ties that centered in the hand of God” (Howells, *Novels* 309).

Wai Chee Dimock has argued that “complicity” is a moral and formal problem for the realist novel insofar as it awakens us to the unthinkable scale of human interconnection in urban-industrial society. Implicitly referencing Robert Wiebe’s influential thesis, that the nineteenth century saw a transformation from “island communities” to a vast national network answerable to urban-industrial supply and demand,¹³ Dimock writes:

As local livelihood became tied to distant events—to the Wall Street crash of 1873, for instance, or the bitter railroad strikes of 1877—local welfare also seemed bound up with the welfare of strangers, strangers unknown, unloved, unconscionably numerous. Nineteenth-century Americans, in short, had to adapt not only to an expanded geographical universe but also, even more crucially, to an expanded causal universe, in which human agency, social relations, and moral responsibility all had to be redefined. (“Economy” 102)

¹³ See Wiebe xii-xiv.

Although Dimock focuses on transcontinental railways and big business, realist and naturalist writers often registered the interconnection of America by looking to new urban structures that were seen to embody this process, such as the stunning vertical growth of skyscrapers (the home of big business)¹⁴ or the horizontal extension of public transportation (city-specific versions of the many-tentacled “octopus” that is the national railroad system).¹⁵

Howells preferred the latter image: “There’s nothing like having railroads and steamboats transact your plot for you” (qtd. in Goodman and Dawson 74). In *The Minister’s Charge*, Barker learns the contours of Boston and meets the characters that will be central to his urban *Bildung* by following the horse-car lines, taking note of their stopping-points and thus creating a cognitive map of the city.¹⁶ In *Hazard*, Boston transplants Basil and Isabel March explore New York City by riding the El, sometimes just to see how far they could take them (something the poet George Oppen and his wife would later do using the next generation of rapid transit, the subway).¹⁷ Between 1886 and 1890, *Minister’s Charge* and *Hazard*, there is a discernible shift from Boston to New York as the big city that Howells’s protagonists must learn to map (along with his readers) as well as a transformation in public transportation technology, from ground-level tracks navigated by horses to steam-powered locomotives rumbling along huge, elevated steel structures. Eventually, the growing city could no longer rely on such a large, loud, slow, clumsy means of public transport, going

¹⁴ The banker in the bottom floor of Henry Blake Fuller’s fictional skyscraper in *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) has “business interests spread all over the city, the state, the West, even the Far West, and this vast web must have a center. That center was on the lower floor of the Clifton” (80).

¹⁵ Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) is built around the popular image of a railroad monopoly as a giant octopus sucking life from various places across the country. María Ruiz De Burton, in *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), offers a more sanguine assessment of the Texas and Pacific Railway—which promised to unite the South and the West, literally and symbolically—while also lambasting the monopolistic practices of Southern California railroads. See Thomas 208-242.

¹⁶ See chapter 2 for James’s version of cognitive mapping in Boston.

¹⁷ In her autobiography, Mary Oppen writes: “We didn’t yet know the subway system, and we got off at stations at random just to see what was above ground. Once we stuck our heads out into a cemetery, another time we were on clay fields with standing pools of water, and once we were among gigantic identical apartment buildings in the Bronx, block after block” (89).

below ground instead of above it.¹⁸ “It was technological innovations,” Gunther Barth writes, “from horsecar to subway, rather than architectural forms, that unified the space of the modern city” (28). Howells would agree: technological developments in public transportation spurred the creation of the modern city, with New York as its capital. After all, there is an instructive difference between Barker’s piecemeal approach to mapping the city using the small but crowded terrain of Boston’s horse-car lines and the Marches riding New York’s elevated lines, which were run by two private companies (the New York Elevated Company and the Metropolitan Railroad Company). In this way, Howells’s novels support a city-specific version of Wiebe’s narrative: the nineteenth-century city saw the move from “island communities” (isolated neighborhoods) to a fully incorporated civic system.

As Dimock points out, there is a dark side to this triumphalist account whereby machines and/or buildings evoke a sense of urban interconnection: “The nineteenth century, an age of rapid industrial expansion, was also an age of industrial poverty and urban slums, haunted both by the growing proximity and visibility of human suffering and by the perception that this suffering was not just an isolated phenomenon but part of a symptomatic network” (“Economy” 101). If we are all tangled up in a city’s rapid transit system, then everyone is responsible for the suffering of fellow city people. Complicity is a problem insofar as it threatens to stretch the bounds of moral responsibility beyond the limits typically respected by novelistic representation; thus, it requires a narrative solution: the economy of pain, figured by Sewell as a moral limited liability that reduces the number of people for whom one is responsible. “Even within the space of these two novels [*Lapham* and *Charge*],” Dimock writes, “a double pattern begins to emerge: a problem and a solution, something that produces moral entanglements and something that releases those

¹⁸ For a fuller historical overview of public transportation technologies see Cheape 21-39; and Sante 46-54.

entanglements” (“Economy” 103). This logic has a corollary in the humanitarian thinking of the day, which posited “that different people might feel [pain] differently” (read: less) than “the more civilized races” (105). Isabel March states this position clearly: “I don’t believe there’s any *real* suffering . . . among those people [the urban poor]; that is, it would be suffering from our point of view, but they’ve been used to it all their lives, and they don’t feel the discomfort so much” (Howells, *Hazard* 60). Annie Kilburn, meanwhile, “discovered what must always astonish the inquirer below the pretentious surface of our democracy—an indifference and incredulity concerning the feelings of people of lower station” (Howells, *Novels* 752). With complicity, Howells recognizes moral complicity—“[w]e are all bound together,” Annie Kilburn asserts (792)—but with the economy of pain he “tries to minimize not only suffering but also the obligations that suffering entails” (Dimock, “Economy” 103).

In the end, Dimock’s wide-ranging essay on the cognitive limits of sympathy from the nineteenth century to today confirms Kaplan’s account of Howells: his characters are plucked from the white middle class while the suffering underclass is effectively banished from novelistic existence. Dimock’s complementary forces can also be transcoded as Jameson’s affect and named emotions. Sewell’s economy of pain is part of a system of named emotions: “human feelings” must be presented in their “true proportion and relation” (Howells, *Lapham* 197). While feelings and emotions are different categories, the point here is that they are proportioned out and named.¹⁹ Defined this way, though, Sewell’s doctrine of complicity follows the same logic. When Sewell delivers his sermon, the word “complicity” names the guilt he feels about Barker’s ever-degrading moral and physical condition in Boston and, beyond that, about the suffering working poor (“It was largely supposed that Sewell’s sermon referred indirectly to [a] telegraphers’ strike”) (Howells, *Novels*

¹⁹ Jameson distinguishes between emotions and feelings, the latter term belonging to affect (*Antinomies* 31-32).

308). Widespread suffering is an affective experience insofar as it explodes the possibilities of narration, but when complicity is named as guilt it can be resolved by the economy of pain, which tries to limit this (named) emotion by blocking out the presence of “the other half.”

In one sense, then, Dimock is right: there is no real development between Howells’s two theories, only self-cancelling, downsizing, economizing. Dimock’s complementary process requires a response from the realm of affect if Howells’s work can be said to develop at all. Bodily suffering is no help, since its very existence inspires the named feeling of complicity (guilt) and is thus readily made complementary to the bourgeois character system. John Cyril Barton has introduced a polyvocal theory of complicity that can offset the theory of a flawed character like Reverend Sewell. The line Dimock attaches to Sewell’s sermon on complicity—“everybody’s mixed up with everybody else” (qtd. in “Economy” 102)—is, in fact, spoken by a horse-car conductor in *The Minister’s Charge* (Howells, *Novels* 126). Sewell uses the word “tangled” in what is otherwise the exact same line (308). Barton suggests that the conductor is a privileged spokesperson for complicity in realism because he is the kind of everyday character Howells wants to introduce to the reading public.

The horse-car conductor, in fact, provides a theory of complicity that introduces bodily feelings thus far shut out of the realist novel:

It’s a pretty queer kind of a world, anyway, the way everybody’s mixed up with everybody else. What’s the reason, if a man wants to steal, he can’t steal and suffer for it himself, without throwin’ the shame and the blame on a lot more people that never thought o’ stealin’? I don’t notice much when a fellow sets out to do right that folks think everybody else is on the square. No, sir, they don’t seem to consider that kind of complaint so catching. Now. You take another thing: A woman goes round with the scarlet fever in her clothes and a whole carful of people take it home to their children; but let a nice young girl get in, fresh as an apple, and a perfect daisy for wholesomeness every way, and she don’t give it to a single soul on board. (126)

It might not seem like the conductor adds anything new to the doctrine of complicity. His sense that a thief shames not only himself but the whole community is precisely the lesson

that the minister will later teach (309). The conductor also makes a related point that Sewell will later echo: why can't a man's good deed then reflect positively on the community?

It is the conductor's last point that strikes a different note. A speech that begins as a morality tale fit for the pulpit becomes, by the end, a question of bodily contamination: why is it that scarlet fever can be passed so easily from passenger to passenger but not a girl's wholesomeness? Wholesomeness, here, does not signify moral goodness but a health-giving property, which makes scarlet fever the perfect inverse example: both are contagious but one has the potential to kill while the other has the potential to strengthen. The most obvious difference between Sewell and the conductor, then, is that the former is pessimistic about the current state of urban-industrial society but imagines a utopian transformation brought on by the followers of Christ; the latter wonders why a girl's wholesomeness does not infect people in the here-and-now. If Sewell's conception of complicity evokes the image of urban transit connecting disparate people in a single system, then the conductor offers a micro-level approach to the same phenomenon, without the barriers put up by the system of named emotions (guilt) and hence language itself: he longs for a time-place where strangers feel good because they are equally in this veritable web of urban life together.

Of course, scarlet fever does infect those on the train car, while the girl's wholesomeness does not. We will return to this sense of failure shortly. To illustrate what contagious wholesomeness might look like in practice, though, we can quote from one of Howells's favorite authors, Tolstoy, as he describes the pregnant Lise at the beginning of *War and Peace*: "Everyone brightened at the sight of this pretty young woman . . . Old men and dull dispirited young ones who looked at her, after being in her company and talking to her a little while, felt as if they too were becoming, like her, full of life and health" (qtd. in Jameson, *Antinomies* 92). While affect is often registered through a single character's body as

s/he moves through the world, in this passage there is an “affective contagion, a glowing enlargement of affect well beyond the natural limits and boundaries of the individual subject” (Jameson, *Antinomies* 92). The conductor’s wish for contagious wholesomeness belongs to the “interpersonal” (93) version of affect. Wholesomeness is not this girl’s unique moral trait in a sinful world; rather, it is a bodily state defined by its transmissibility.

The health-giving property hinted at with the word “wholesome” therefore overcomes the typical signification of the word, serving instead as the bodily marker of the feeling of urban interconnection that is given narrative figuration in/as the public transportation system. While wholesomeness ultimately resists categorization, the system of named emotions returns at the end of *The Minister’s Charge* to make sense of this feeling. For the reader, Sewell’s sermon on complicity names the feeling of urban interconnection first expressed by the conductor, replicating almost the exact same line the conductor fed Barker, with only the verb changed. Barton is right to say that this change matters greatly: “On the one hand, the conductor’s ‘mixed up’ invokes a metaphor of partnership, a metaphor of social intermixing . . . in which individuals become part of a whole yet retain their discreet identities . . . Sewell’s ‘tangled up,’ on the other hand, calls to mind a metaphor of incorporation, a textual metaphor in which separate identities are interwoven to form a single, homogeneous fabric or corporate identity” (182). I will argue the opposite point, however: it is Sewell who makes room for the self/other distinction by drawing on moral categories (good/evil) and named emotions (guilt), which is what allows Howells’s character systems to be foregrounded against “the other half.” The horse-car conductor wants to

explode the self/other distinction, and hence embrace radical social equality and unity, with a transmissible feeling that serves as a metaphorical reference to urban interconnection.²⁰

In other words, the conductor's version of complicity, were it to succeed, would feel like equality; or, rather, it would *show* what equality feels like. After all, as Howells writes in *Suburban Sketches* (1871)—a travelogue about Cambridge, Massachusetts—the Boston horse-car “suffer[s] no . . . inequality”: “The people who are thus indecorously huddled and jammed together, without regard to age or sex, otherwise lead lives of at least comfort, and a good half of them cherish themselves in every physical way with unparalleled zeal” (104, 112). This is a moment of exception in which the rampant individualism of modern American culture is checked by the state of bodily equality required by the small size and high occupancy of the horse-cars. Howells goes so far as to claim that “when art becomes truly national the overloaded horse-car will be celebrated in painting and sculpture” (113). There is an element of humor in the mixing of high art and low, everyday subject matter. At the same time, Howells's description of the crowded horse-car limns his rejoinder, in the pages of *Harper's*, to Matthew Arnold's disparaging claim that American society lacks “distinction”: “If we have really got rid of distinction of the sort he seems to prize, we have made a great advance on the lines of our fundamental principles” (*Selected* 95). “One of the truths which Americans have always held to be self-evident,” he explains, “was that a man, if he was honest, was not only privileged, but was in duty bound, to look other men in the face, with eyes as nearly upon the same level as congenital differences would allow” (95). Natural differences cannot be avoided but social distinctions are artificial and contrary to democracy. “The fear with most Americans,” he goes on, “has been that our social structure

²⁰ According to Laclau and Mouffe (111), all forms of equivalence disrupt the system of differences in which we are placed, which is what metaphor does on a linguistic level and antagonism does on a political level.

was not responsive to our political ideal”; he then lists, in Jamesian fashion, where America comes up short: “we cannot be particularly proud of our legislatures and administrations; the relations of capital and labor in our free democracy are about as full of violence as those in any European monarchy; we have wasted the public lands which we won largely by force and fraud, and we are the prey of many vast and corrupting monopolies” (95).

If Arnold were right about the lack of distinction in America, Howells reasons, then “democracy has subtly but surely done its work; our professions of belief in equality have had their effect in our life” (96). The horse-car, at least, offers a time-place where bodies are packed so tightly that cultural distinctions are erased and equality prevails. Elias Canetti makes a similar point in *Crowds and Power* (1960). Normally, social life is defined by distinctions of rank, status, and property, but in dense crowds “distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal*”—a feeling he describes as “so desired and so happy” (18). Jodi Dean’s gloss on Canetti’s work helps us perceive that this is a moment in which the theft of enjoyment Howells associates with inequality is momentarily eclipsed: “Canetti gives us the crowd as a strange attractor of *jouissance*, a figure of collective enjoyment,” which Dean also names “affective pull of the crowd” (“Dual Power” 115, 113). She also distances this from the formal “*bourgeois equality*” attacked by the Marxian tradition (113). Crowd equality is the real thing. “All . . . theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd” (Canetti 29).

Yet, in *Suburban Sketches*, the shared feeling or affect that arises from the bodily equality on the horse car is hardly the relieving situation Canetti and Dean describe: “The horse-car . . . reduces us all to the same level of melancholy” (104). Melancholia, Jameson points out, is the *sine qua none* of affect; but instead of absolutizing it as such he suggests that “melancholy stand[s] . . . in an imperceptible relationship with its more vulgar opposite

number, euphoria" (*Antinomies* 72). Euphoria was the expected response to crowd equality but instead we find the affective scale stuck around melancholia, somewhere between revulsion, envy, and euphoria. Recalling the torpor and antisocial behavior associated with melancholia, Howells comments on the "mystery of our strength as a nation and our weakness as a public" (*Suburban* 114). "Weakness as a public" signifies the crowd's inability to come together in a manner befitting the democratic ideals that its tangled bodies evoke. This is how we can read the conductor's lament: we are too sad to notice the young girl's wholesomeness, let alone share in it. Indeed, Howells sounds like a combination of the horse-car conductor and Tolstoy when he opines about "the frequent presence of those lovely young girls in which Boston and the suburban towns abound and who . . . would brighten even the horse-car if fresh young looks and gay and brilliant costumes could do so much" (*Suburban* 105). What would it take to brighten up a melancholic crowd?

Instead of telling us the answer, Howells shows us an example:

The silencing influence is quite successfully resisted by none but the tipsy people who occasionally ride out with us, and call up a smile, sad as a gleam of winter sunshine, to our faces by their artless prattle. I remember one eventful afternoon that we were all but moved to laughter by the gayeties of such a one, who, even after he had ceased to talk, continued to amuse us by falling asleep, and reposing himself against the shoulder of the lady next him. Perhaps it is in acknowledgment of the agreeable variety they contribute to horse-car life, that the conductor treats his inebriate passengers with such unfailing tenderness and forbearance. (99-100)

There is a cause (the drunk) behind this change in group feeling but it is far less important than the process of turning melancholic silence into shared joy in this temporary state of equality. A successful democratic crowd, then, shares momentary joy in the lack of distinction on the horse-car, punctuating long periods of melancholic silence.

For the same reason, melancholy is not a permanent response to situational equality but rather a contingent feature that depends not just on the crowd but on the observer's mood. In *The Minister's Charge*, Lemuel Barker counters "the black pessimism of the

conductor” with characteristic optimism: “Maybe the right thing makes us feel good in some way we don’t know of” (Howells, *Novels* 126). If affect escapes language, then perhaps we could pick up the girl’s wholesomeness without even realizing it. The conductor responds: “Well, I don’t want to feel good in some way I don’t know of, myself” (126). Barker begrudgingly accepts this logic and I think Howells does, too: there must be some register of affective contagion, otherwise we cannot speak of a democratic public being formed around the state of bodily equality on the horse-car. Thus, I want to suggest that Howells lauds Barker’s optimism at the same time as he concedes the conductor’s point: realist authors and readers should be on the lookout for those (relatively rare) moments when a crowd sloughs off melancholic silence and revels in the “social joy” of equality (Howells, “Equality” 63).

In *Suburban Sketches*, the conductor facilitates the momentary good mood of his passengers. In *The Minister’s Charge*, Howells probes the problems with this example. At the end of the novel, Barker becomes a horse-car conductor to support his sickly fiancée, introducing class differences to the relatively smiling picture of crowd equality:

He entered upon his duties the next morning, under the instruction of an old conductor, who said “Hain’t I seen you som’eres before?” and he worked all day, taking money and tickets, registering fares, helping ladies on and off the car, and monotonously journeying back and forth over his route . . . At nightfall, after two half-hour respites for dinner and tea, he was so tired that he could hardly stand. (*Novels* 298)

To confirm that this working-class lifestyle is not for Barker, Howells has him become injured on the job (he is kicked by one of the horses) and sent back to the countryside. The lesson is clear but unnerving: to turn pessimism to optimism on the horse-car, one would need to bracket all signs of lurking class differences and occupational hierarchies.

Howells’s auto-critique of the democratic crowd allows us to see that someone or some group is necessarily excluded when the crowd achieves bodily equality on the train car—whether that be the conductor or the people who simply cannot afford this means of

transportation (at the beginning of *Minister's Charge* Barker fits the latter category). There is also the inevitable return of hierarchies and inequalities when members of the crowd arrive at the office or return home.²¹ In comparison to the equality of the drawing room, the train car is more inclusive, and thus its equality more “real,” but it is still an exclusive, temporary time-place. This is Schmitt’s lesson in antagonism for liberal universalism: equality means that somebody, some group (Rancière would call it the “part with no part”) does not count as equal. This is a tough lesson to swallow, which explains why Howells is as pessimistic as the conductor: there will never be “real” equality that encompasses everybody; a line is always drawn between those who get to count as equal and those who do not.

Around the publication of *Minister's Charge*, Howells was beset by melancholia and liberal guilt. At this point in his career, that is, the complementary pair of complicity (a named emotion) and melancholy (an affect) replaced the play-equality of the knowable community, which had been enjoyed only when the economy of pain reduced the awareness of suffering and eased guilt. In other words, the economy of pain stopped functioning properly and excessive guilt in the face of mass suffering became matched with melancholic resignation. This stems from Howells’s unsuccessful defense of the Haymarket anarchists in the fall of 1886 and the death of his eldest daughter, Winifred, in the spring of 1888.²²

III. Melancholia and Liberal Guilt: An Interlude

After four of the so-called Haymarket rioters were hanged on November 11, 1886 Howells penned an editorial attacking “the whole nation” for openly or tacitly supporting the state-sanctioned murder of these men “for their opinions’ sake” (qtd. in Cady, *Realist*

²¹ This is true of Canetti’s crowd as well: “the people who suddenly feel equal have not really become equal; nor will they *feel* equal for ever. They return to their separate houses, they lie down on their own beds, they keep their possessions and their names” (Canetti 18).

²² On Winifred Howells’ illness, see Cady, *Realist* 96.

74).²³ Michael Anesko notes that the doctrine of complicity took on more of a political role in Howells's writing around this time (196). In Sewellian fashion, complicity meant that all Americans were guilty of letting four men be sent to death by the state for their opinions. Complicity speaks to Howells's liberal guilt, an often remarked-upon aspect of his persona.²⁴

Howells was also deeply melancholic for personal reasons. In a famous October 1888 letter to Henry James, written one month before he placed Winifred in the care of Dr. Weir (of the notorious "rest cure") as a last resort, Howells writes: "I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality" (Anesko 272). His earlier call to look at the "smiling aspects of life" has turned to outright despair. Howells does reference an escape that appears superficially radical: society would have to "bas[e] itself anew on a real equality." But then Howells offers a resigned critique of himself for perpetuating social distinctions: "Meantime I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy" (272). We can relate this to Wendy Brown's "left melancholy," a melancholic attachment to socialist ideals stripped of a belief in true change. In his book on the intersection of American realism and liberalism, Phillip Barrish compares left melancholy and liberal guilt: "Suffering from liberal guilt or left melancholy, one feels hopelessly implicated in mechanisms of violence, injustice, and exploitation" (*Liberal* 11).

How does Howells break from the melancholic despair and guilt-ridden language of the liberal bourgeoisie? One possible response has already been covered: the economy of pain limits his and his readers' cognitive awareness of the vast suffering going on "out there"

²³ Cady's *The Realist at War* (1958) remains the best source for the facts surrounding Howells's involvement in the Haymarket affair. He provides an inscription of the unsent letter to the *New York Tribune*. See 69-80.

²⁴ See Bramen 93.

and their structural role in maintaining it. But we are deep in a search for aesthetic and political alternatives to the economy of pain. Another answer is hidden in the way Howells re-edited the “smiling aspects” passage in 1891 for publication in *Criticism and Fiction*: “the wrong from class to class has been almost inappreciable, *though this is changing for the worst*. Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life” (*Selected* 336, emphasis mine). More so than before, the passage is a challenge for writers to locate the utopian moments of everyday urbanism. If melancholic resignation and liberal guilt are ever-present feelings and emotions (respectively) in a world where class struggle is only deepening, the key is to locate moments when crowd feelings arrive at the “smiling” end of the affective spectrum. This is different from the outright ignorance of the Other’s suffering prescribed by the economy of pain. Class (and other) antagonisms are considered but not in a way that will prevent the crowd from enjoying momentary equality. We can think of this new attitude alongside Mouffe’s attempt to liberalize Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction: conceding that all claims to equality are necessarily local and delimiting, she nonetheless calls for the continual inclusion of new subjects into the democratic circle of equals.²⁵

Howells calls for novelists to enjoy an instance of everyday equality outside the drawing room instead of feeling melancholic or expressing guilt about its limits. In *Suburban Sketches* and *The Minister’s Charge* Boston’s horse-car system represents the best opportunity for a crowd to congeal around a shared feeling, even if instances of this were rare if not completely foreclosed. By the time he wrote *Hazard*, Howells had moved from Boston to New York and now viewed the latter as the laboratory for American democracy-in-action. However, New York’s horse-car system was not only outmoded by the 1890s, it was steeped in labor struggles, as we will see. Howells looks to the next generation of public

²⁵ See Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox* 44-45.

transportation, the El, for a mode of representation that can burst beyond the constricting categories of his own earlier realist project (an economy of pain that assuages guilt while remaining stuck in the realm of named emotions). The fact that it is the El, and not the horse-car, that unlocks such a possibility can be explained by Howells's willingness to adapt to the times: it represents the next step in bringing city people into a single, unified system and thus offers an unprecedented chance for riders to feel joy in being mixed together with others, living completely in the moment where one can be temporarily free of liberal guilt and melancholic sadness. Luc Sante even describes the El in Howellsian terms: "The El was democratic in a way that no other means of transport had been: higher-priced luxury streetcars ran on Third Avenue for many years, and for a while the Sixth Avenue surface line even maintained Jim Crow wagons. The El mixed everybody up together" (53).

To understand how this works, we need to pay attention to the different kinds of spaces taking up narrative attention in this loose, baggy novel. In his essay on the "chronotope" (time-space) in the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that there are three "new space[s]" through which events run to shape the narrative of the nineteenth-century European realist novel: "the space of parlors and salons" (where "webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and finally—this is where *dialogues* happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes"); the provincial town ("the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there are no events, only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves . . . It is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space"); and, finally, the chronotope of the threshold ("the time and place of crisis, the instantaneous moment when fates are changed forever, people fall or rise") (246, 247, 248). Howells's *Hazard* offers a unique take on each of these three chronotopes: the newspaper office serves as a literary salon where characters meet, engage in

agonistic debate, and make decisions about one another's fate; the El becomes the time-space of the everyday, when/where nothing happens to advance the plot; and finally, the horse-car strike is the climax of the novel, the antagonistic limit beyond which the characters' lives are changed forever. Before approaching the distinction between the El and the horse-car, though, we need to detail why the chronotope of the parlor is ineffective in its role at the aesthetic and political center of the novel and hence why two other peripheral spaces become testing-grounds for a new development in American literary realism.

With *Hazard*, Howells makes evident the aesthetic and political qualities that will infuse these chronotopes when deployed by the rest of the realists in this study. Antagonism, for instance, is felt on a threshold: existing in the background for most of the novel, or in the foreground as a symptom of violence past and future (Lindau's hand), antagonistic urban violence suddenly becomes unleashed in its full capacity and warps the text to the point where a "strategy of containment" (Kaplan 10) is needed to achieve aesthetic closure (a process bound for failure since there can be no final closure). The chronotope of the office is the avenue through which Howells learns to channel the background antagonism into the foreground of agonistic debate without sacrificing language and narration. While this could be mistaken for containment of antagonistic violence on Howells's part, we will see that agonistic dialogue disrupts the consensus desired by the *characters* and thus motivates economizing strategies within the character system. These chronotopes do not exhaust the realist novel. There is still a vast time-space "out there" of people going about their lives, for which the El serves as Howells's emblem. Because they do not give off obvious signs of inequality or suffering, the bodies and voices populating this time-space are not defined enough to be either a friend or an enemy in an antagonistic relation; they are neither oppressed nor oppressive. Yet, their affective presence exposes the false totality of the

character system and brings narration to a halt. To make a distinction that the rest of my authors (sans James) attempt to bridge in their own ways, these bodies/voices are aesthetically antagonistic without yet being politically so. Howells, more concretely, is unable to make the El the site for a radical-democratic politics. It is his genius, though, to make the El the space of everyday affect in the realist novel, since it comes with a material barrier to narration/dialogue in the form of overwhelming noise. Instead of falling for the temptations of narration/dialogue in this time-place, Howells rides the El to the point of narrative silence, pushing his novelistic project to the yet-unmapped realm of modernism.

IV. The Chronotopes of *Hazard*

Hazard centers on a New York-based literary magazine funded by a natural gas tycoon with a Social Darwinian worldview (Dryfoos), promoted by an advertising man (Fulkerson), managed by the tycoon's Christian socialist son (Conrad Dryfoos), and edited by Basil March, the closest thing to a protagonist in the novel. The magazine is set up such that profit will be shared equally amongst its wide cast of contributors, including a self-obsessed aesthete (Angus Beaton, who serves as the art editor), a reactionary who believes that slavery was better than capitalism (Colonel Woodburn), and a German translator who lost his hand in the Civil War but has become a socialist (Lindau). As a profit-sharing venture, the magazine, *Every Other Week*, "amounted to something in literature as radical as the American Revolution in politics; it was the idea of self-government in the arts" (183).

The newspaper office, meanwhile, "offers the only point of intersection for all the characters in the novel and, for many, their only social and economic tie to New York City" (Kaplan 55). As Basil March explains to his wife, the group that gathers in the Greenwich Village office, which Kaplan calls a "knowable community," is quite a motley crew:

I don't believe there's another publication in New York that could bring together . . . a fraternity and equality crank like poor old Lindau, and a belated sociological crank

like Woodburn, and a truculent speculator like old Dryfoos, and a humanitarian dreamer like young Dryfoos, and a sentimentalist like me, and a nondescript like Beaton, and a pure advertising essence like Fulkerson . . . (Howells, *Hazard* 281)

Individual traits and characteristics are highlighted, as if to show off the contrasting personalities that merge together for a common endeavor. Indeed, this is how March also describes their first issue: “the heterogeneous forces did cooperate to a reality which March could not deny . . . and the first number was representative of all their nebulous intentions in a tangible form” (169). Both on the page and in the office, political and aesthetic unities are crafted from a variety of opinions: it is an example of liberal democracy in literature.

While the individual stands at the center of this community, Fulkerson adds an important caveat: “It’s astonishing how you always *can* get along in this world without the man that is simply indispensable. Makes a fellow realize that he could take a day off now and then without deranging the solar system a great deal” (384). If they are equal in the profit-sharing scheme, then they are equally replaceable. Idiosyncrasies are acceptable so long as they do not disrupt the liberal-democratic solar system. In fact, the dramatic thrust of *Hazard* turns around two events where the moral and aesthetic limits of this knowable community are tested, not by a day off (as Fulkerson jokes) but by revolutionary politics. First, Lindau levels a personal and political attack against Dryfoos at a dinner party the latter hosts; and second, Lindau and Conrad are killed because of injuries suffered at a horse-car strike. However, these events set in motion an economy of pain to restore consensus.

The first event is easiest to see in this light. Despite Fulkerson’s attempt to keep the conversation away from politics at a dinner party celebrating the magazine, a discussion of the Civil War and a toast to Lindau’s “empty sleeve” (290) introduce the specter of social antagonism, which in the postbellum urban setting of the novel signifies class relations.²⁶ In

²⁶ See the introduction to this dissertation for a reading of Lindau’s missing hand along these lines.

Howells's terms, the missing hand signals the not-quite-wholeness of society and hence the ejected bodily presence of (class) violence continuing apace amongst "the other half." At this moment, the "absent presence" of urban antagonism is drawn into the content of the dinner party talk, disrupting the play-equality and the good feelings (the celebration of the magazine) the attendees might have enjoyed. Lindau suggests that egotistical "pusiness motives" (business motives) moved some men to fight and die for the North or South (289, 290). This leads the Southern apologist Colonel Woodburn to

sho[w] how commercialism was the poison at the heart of our national life; how we began as a simple, agricultural people . . . [and] how the spirit of commercialism had stolen insidiously upon us and the infernal impulse of competition had embroiled us in a perpetual warfare of interests . . . till now that impulse had exhausted itself, and we found competition gone, and the whole economic problem in the hand of monopolies. (292-293)

Dryfoos, the Social Darwinian millionaire, "did not like to hear competition called infernal; he had always supposed it was something sacred, but he approved of what Colonel Woodburn said of the Standard Oil Company" since monopolies drive down prices (293). The party deteriorates when Dryfoos glorifies his fights with the labor unions, after which Lindau calls him a "tyrant" in German, though he says it to March, who speaks German (298). Colonel Woodburn interrupts to say that this commercial society is not long for life—a sentiment with which Lindau agrees—but then calls for a return to feudalism: "we shall build upon the central idea, not of the false liberty you now worship, but of responsibility. . . . The enlightened, the moneyed, the recultivated class shall be responsible to the central authority. . . . The working classes shall be responsible to the leisure class for the support of its dignity in peace and shall be subject to its command in war" (298-299). Lindau takes a familiar socialist line in response, though he (dis)articulates it using Lincoln's famous definition of democracy: "All the roads and mills and mines and lands shall be the people's and be run *by* the people *for* the people. There shall be no rich and no poor" (299).

What we have here is a literary version of Mouffe's dialogical agonism, which she also calls "conflictual consensus": the men all agree on the terms of the debate—which are liberal-democratic principles like liberty, equality, brotherhood, and the people—but they all define, value, and even pronounce these terms differently. The undeniable fact of antagonism in urban America, signaled by Lindau's empty sleeve, structures their positions. Fulkerson's attempts to steer the conversation back toward the magazine is a reminder of the liberal emphasis on non-conflictual consensus that first held them together. Unlike Fulkerson, who wishes to keep the "real" New York in the background, Kaplan claims that Lindau "forces 'the other half' into the line of vision," "bridg[ing] the background and the foreground, undermining the reassuring distinctions between them" (56, 57). But she qualifies this: Howells's own representation of Lindau's broken English re-contains this now-present "background," "muting the force of his speech" (57). I want to suggest that the channeling of antagonism into agonism is equivalent to the intermingling of background and foreground in Kaplan; however, Kaplan overstates the silencing of Lindau's voice in the fierce character debates of the foreground. Lindau is paid as a contributor to the newspaper and invited to the dinner party celebrating its success (recall Howells's thesis in "Equality": if you are invited to a party, you are treated as an equal). Furthermore, we learn that Dryfoos grew up around the Pennsylvania Dutch and understands Lindau's German insults, along with March and, thanks to Howells's translation, the readers. Lindau's words *are* heard, which means that he participates in the conversion of antagonism into the debates between secondary characters that mark the foreground at this moment.

Since he feels insulted by an employee in his own home, Dryfoos moves to fire Lindau as a translator for the magazine. Fulkerson supports Dryfoos while March defends his friend's right to a political position that contrasts with that of the financial "angel." It is

Fulkerson's job to patch up the agonism threatening liberal consensus. *This* is where Kaplan's thesis holds water: it is not in the sound of Lindau's voice—and hence the formal decisions of Howells qua realist author—but the moves made by the characters when agonistic debate goes too far that re-contain the threat of otherness. Fulkerson's is a familiar position, as it turns on the desire to sacrifice one person (Lindau) instead of seeing the whole magazine go belly-up because of March's offered self-sacrifice (if Lindau goes, I go, March in effect tells Fulkerson). The minimum number of people who must suffer for this transgression becomes the main point of the debate.

Throughout this process, Fulkerson is beside himself as March blocks his attempt to deliver punishment to one instead of many. Fortunately for Fulkerson, Lindau resigns his position, effectively sacrificing himself—his job, his income, and, most abstractly, his status as a character. However, even with this instance of self-sacrifice, the newspaper is saved with its ideals still intact—after all, individuals are equally replaceable. As “the affairs of *Every Other Week* settled into their wonted form again,” March oscillates between self-reproach (he never told Lindau that Dryfoos was a strikebreaker) and “moments of revolt against his own humiliation before Lindau” (March does not sympathize with his friend's politics) (330). The feeling that Howells is illustrating for us here is guilt: March returns to work knowing that an innocent man was punished for his political opinions (the novel's version of the Haymarket trial) and he, unlike Lindau, is still tied with that noose-like rope to Dryfoos' ill-gotten gains (capitalistic complicity). When March starts to criticize himself for his own feeling of guilt, Howells suggests that his main character's feelings are melancholically impotent.

Lindau is the only character in the novel who acts out the possibility for radical political change. If this is so, then, as Kaplan notes, “[i]n the climactic strike near the end of *Hazard* the threat posed by Lindau is dramatized on the streets of the city” (59). The 1889

New York horse-car strike was a godsend for Howells: once he realized that the climax of the novel would center on the strike, “the story began to find its way to issues nobler and larger than those of love-affairs common to fiction” (“Bibliographical” vi). This is why it is proper to call the strike a chronotope of the threshold: it is a narrative limit toward which everything has been geared and after which nothing will be the same.

At first, the horse-car strike is framed entirely by its relation to the newspaper. “The strike” not only “made a good deal of talk in the office of *Every Other Week*” but March is encouraged to break a promise to his wife and visit the scene of the strike so he can work it up into a story (354). Fulkerson makes March an offer he can’t refuse: “you could treat it in the historical spirit—like something that happened several centuries ago” (357). He knows he has his man: March had just compared the fight between “[t]he roads and the strikers” to “a private war in our midst . . . as any street was in Florence or Verona” (356). As March heads out to capture the strike in these terms, he is initially disappointed: the streets are empty save for a strong police presence. He hails “a crosstown car” (359) and converses with an officer on board. The officer’s demeanor “gave him a fine sense of the ferocity which he had read of the French troops putting on toward the populace just before the *coup d'état*; he began to feel like populace, but he struggled with himself and regained his character of philosophical observer” (359-360). After March imagines himself one of the crowd, we come to the threshold: “Suddenly the car stopped . . . and the police-man jumped down from the platform and ran forward” (360). The next chapter circles back to detail Dryfoos’s day, including a fight with his son that sends the latter to the scene of his death.

Before we cross the threshold, we should pause at the moment when March “began to feel like populace.” Russ Castronovo contrasts “feeling like populace” with a correct version of the sentence with an article (“a” or “the”), which he likens to the contemporary

distinction between “feeling like shit” (subjection, abjection) and “feeling like the shit” (feeling great): “in the first, March relishes subjection and timidity while in the second he flirts with an empowering collective identification” (103). No doubt because of the overt presence of social inequalities, Howells ultimately registers a downtrodden, melancholic feeling instead of the “smiling” mode he so desperately seeks. But this is only the lead-up to the threshold. As we cross it, an antagonistic violence spills over into the text:

The driver was lashing his horses forward, and a policeman was at their heads, with the conductor, pulling them; stones, clubs, brickbats hailed upon the car, the horses, the men trying to move them. The mob closed upon them in a body, and then a patrol wagon whirled up from the other side, and a squad of policemen leaped out and began to club the rioters. Conrad could see how they struck them under the rims of their hats; the blows on their skulls sounded as if they had fallen on stone; the rioters ran in all directions. (Howells, *Hazard* 368)

There is nothing like this anywhere else in the novel—the chaos of moving bodies (human and animal), the brutal images, the sound of skulls cracking. Antagonism, political and aesthetic at once, warps the text. However, the mere mention of Conrad’s name by Howells begins a familiar process of recognition. First, Conrad hears a familiar dialect (“Why don’t you co and glup the bresidents that insoalt your lawss”) and “recognize[s] Lindau”; moments later, March sees “Lindau drop under the club of a policeman” (368). The scene is ultimately not very different from the ferry sequence in *Lapham*: the presence of the unruly crowd is subdued when the knowable community is circumscribed from within it.

While Conrad Dryfoos is shot and killed immediately, March is the first to learn that Lindau died after a painful surgery to remove his whole arm after it was clubbed. Believing him to still be alive, Dryfoos asks March if he can set up a meeting of reconciliation. What follows is deemed a “ghastly comedy” by the narrator: March tries to let Dryfoos down easy with hints about Lindau’s death (“it would make little difference to Lindau now”) but his boss keeps misunderstanding him, owing in part to the fact that March perversely enjoys

delaying the inevitable (390, 389). When it comes time to inform Dryfoos, March has a curious thought: “he consoled himself by thinking that at least he was not obliged to meet Dryfoos’ wish to make atonement with the fact that Lindau had renounced him and would on no terms work for such a man . . . In this light Lindau seemed the harder of the two” (391). Lindau would have stuck to his principles while Dryfoos, like March, is racked with guilt about his actions. March’s strange alignment with Dryfoos gives the former a feeling of sympathy he lacked when delaying the news of Lindau’s death: their guilt leads them both to a place of political impotence and moral softness in comparison to Lindau. Ultimately,

March felt all the grotesqueness, the hopeless absurdity of Dryfoos’ endeavor at atonement in these vain obsequies to the man for whom he believed his son to have died; but the effort had its magnanimity, its pathos, and there was a poetry that appealed to him in this reconciliation through death of men, of ideas, of conditions, that could only have gone warring on in life. (394-395)

This perfectly describes both the ideal and futility of the economy of pain: the knowable community only stays afloat after Lindau sacrifices his position and then is killed off (in the “cause of disorder,” March tells his son), which motivates guilt-ridden gestures of closure (392). The knowable community shares in this guilt, while Howells gets as much mileage out of the resulting irony and humor as he can (much like the letter to James). Once meant to ease the guilt brought on by urban suffering, the economy of pain now brings its own guilt.

For all their potential energy, neither Lindau nor the strike inaugurates a radical political and aesthetic transformation in Howellsian realism. Importantly, only the street-level system is beset by the strike—the El runs on schedule: “on the avenues, roofed by the elevated roads, this silence of the surface tracks was not noticeable at all in the roar of the trains overhead” (359). On the ground, the narrative and the city are impeded by the strike, creating the need for the now-ineffective economy of pain; however, the elevated trains exist on a different plane of narrative and urban existence that is untouched (and is in fact

invigorated) by the strike. Kaplan and Castronovo both fail to notice the distinction between the El and the horse-car, which has far-reaching consequences: they look to the unsatisfying conclusion of the novel for closure in the antagonism between the knowable community and “the other half.”²⁷ However, the sight and sound of the El still running, triumphant, points to a potentially utopian time-place literally *above* these labor struggles.

This is not necessarily a good thing. Indeed, the text is hyper aware of the El’s intrusive presence in the city: “They kill the streets and avenues; but at least they partially hide them, and that is some comfort; and they do triumph over their prostrate forms with a savage exultation that is intoxicating” (54). While the El aids the character system by connecting the members of the knowable community, it too stands in antagonistic relationship to New York’s “other half.” Kaplan is not wrong to suggest that the El is the machinery by which the Marches both perceive and displace the existence of the lower classes, an action that re-creates, in the aesthetic realm, the process by which the elevated structures displaced homeowners and further alienated social classes even as they appeared to connect the entire city. Thus, on one reading, the El functions like Sewellian complicity, with all its shortcomings: it appears to unite while drawing more distinct lines.

But this is not the whole story. Indeed, one needs to recall Howells’s sympathetic reading, at this point in his career, of Gronlund and Bellamy. Instead of focusing on the battle between labor and capital, Gronlund and Bellamy pointed to the ways America was becoming more collective, with public transit monopolies a prime example. “In 1880,” Charles Cheape writes, “public transportation in large American cities was provided by numerous, competing horsecar companies. . . . By 1912 a monopoly in each city operated a system” (1). A collectivist impulse motivates Howells to find a way to describe something

²⁷ See Kaplan 62-64 and Castronovo 103.

positive about this system: the El is *intoxicating* despite the fact that it “kills the streets.” The violent, divisive yet ostensibly unifying structure of the El is complemented, I will demonstrate, by the intoxicating experience of being *between* stops. The commute is capable of exposing passengers, and in certain cases the adjacent apartment-dwellers, to a truly democratic feeling or affect to which a concept like complicity only weakly alludes.

Keep in mind that the defining feature of the El’s supremacy over the horse-car is the “roar” drowning out the silence of the streets during the strike. The overwhelming sound of the trains will inaugurate the sliding of affect into the “positive” side of the spectrum, thus instituting the horse-car conductor’s dream of a bodily feeling that *shows*, rather than names/narrates, the interconnection of strangers in the city’s vast machinery. The clear formal problem, here—how do you *show* a loud noise?— enables Howells to overcome his own temptation, which becomes Basil March’s, to aestheticize poverty.²⁸

V. The Hazards of New Noises

“First and last,” Howells tells his readers, “the Marches did a good deal of travel on the elevated roads, which, he said, gave you such glimpses of material aspects in the city as some violent invasion of others’ lives might afford in human nature” (264). Their rides on the El tend to be rendered in purely voyeuristic or picturesque terms:

He said it was better than the theater, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows: a family party of workfolk at a late tea, some of the men in their shirt-sleeves; a woman sewing by a lamp; a mother laying her child in its cradle; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover leaning over a windowsill together. What suggestion! What drama! What infinite interest! (66)

The Whitmanesque list of everyday people going about quotidian, domestic tasks becomes mere fodder for a stage production of “How the Other Half Lives.”

²⁸ See Jameson, *Political* 239-242 for a related discussion of Joseph Conrad’s modernism, which involved moving beyond the containment strategies of “the image” by “registering auditory perceptions” associated with modern machines like the railway (239).

Something similar happens when March trains his eye on the people inside the cars:

The sort was never so squalid. For short distances, the lowest poverty, the hardest pressed labor must walk; but March never entered a car without encountering some interesting shape of shabby adversity, which was almost always adversity of foreign birth. . . . The small eyes, the high cheeks, the broad noses, the puff lips, the bare, cue-filleted skulls, of Russians, Poles, Czechs, Chinese; the furtive glitter of Italians; the blond dullness of Germans; the cold quiet of Scandinavians—fire under ice—were aspects that he identified and that gave him abundant suggestion for the personal histories he constructed, and for the more public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth. It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this: what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were. These were the matters of his waking dreams as he stared hard at them, while the train raced further into the gay ugliness—the shapeless, graceless, reckless picturesqueness of the Bowery. (159)

During the ferry ride in *Lapham*, the narration was split between the one who sees, knows, and catalogues otherness (the narrator) and the one who cannot describe what others think, feel, or experience based on external cues (*Lapham*). In *Hazard*, these positions are joined in the figure of March. He begins by cataloguing the races and nationalities like an amateur phrenologist. Out of this raw material he “construct[s]” “personal histories” (159). Unlike *Lapham*, March is not concerned that he cannot know what these people experience—he makes it up as he goes along, creating a picturesque representation of heterogeneity. March plans to work his personal histories into one of his projected “sketches” for *Every Other Week*, which he and Fulkerson hope will tap into the public’s voyeuristic appetite for stories of “life in New York City” that would otherwise remain unseen by middle-class eyes (128).

March’s preference for the aesthetic distance over true contact on the El prefigures Georg Simmel’s complaint about modern urban life:

Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of visual activity over aural activity. The main reason for this is the public means of transportation. Before the development of buses, railroads, and trams in the nineteenth century, people had never been in situations where they had to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another. (qtd. in Benjamin 69)

Howells makes a strikingly similar point in *Suburban Sketches*:

A whole car-full of people, brought into the closest contact with one another, yet in the absence of introductions never exchanging a word, each being so sufficient to himself as to need no social stimulus whatever, is certainly an impressive and stately spectacle. (*Suburban* 99)

The loss of “aural activity” for Simmel means a lack of communication, and one imagines that the solution to this problem is to break the silence and begin a conversation with a stranger on the train. This is not the route March takes: while “listening to the jargon of their unintelligible dialect, he had occasion for pensive question within himself as to what notion these poor animals formed of a free republic from their experience of life under its conditions” (Howells, *Hazard* 158). Even though these “Neapolitans” come from a country (Italy) that March, like his author, knows very well, he deems the Southern Italian dialect unintelligible. Later in the novel, Howells makes it clear that regional dialect does not always obstruct understanding: having grown up with the Pennsylvania Dutch, Dryfoos is able to piece together Lindau’s German. With knowledge of Italian, March might have been able to understand the Neapolitan dialect. Yet, throughout the novel New York’s foreign elements “gratify an aesthetic sense” in March and “renew the faded pleasure of travel” (47): he is happy to escape into a purely visual, picturesque daydream about the foreign riders.

Keith Tester provides a simple explanation for why listening or talking to strangers on the train may be difficult: “It is strange that [Simmel] did not stress the point that public transport is frequently extremely noisy. Either the bus or train makes so much noise that we cannot hear a conversation or, alternatively, there might be so many conversations going on at the same time that it is impossible clearly to make out any single one of them” (92). What if the Neapolitans remain unintelligible because of the train’s unbearable noise? Dialogical agonism is rendered implausible if not impossible by the physical constraints imposed by public transportation. This drives Howells to unleash his lurking interest in bodily states that

tell much more than speech, narration, or dialogue. A new method of representation is needed to bring the El crowd to the foreground. Affect must be decoupled from March's aestheticizing impulses, which attempt to catalogue otherness by nationality if not class.

Sound proves to be effective in this regard. When they first arrive in New York,

[the Marches] recalled the Broadway of five, of ten, of twenty years ago, swelling and roaring with a tide of gaily painted omnibuses and of picturesque traffic that the horsecars have now banished from it. The grind of their wheels and the clash of their harsh bells imperfectly fill the silence that the omnibuses have left, and the eye misses the tumultuous perspective of former times. (Howells, *Hazard* 47)

By paying attention to noise, Howells comes to an entirely different conclusion than Simmel: in the era before the horse-car, the eye reigned supreme; after its advent, the aural takes over. During the strike, the El fills the silence left by the horse-car, illustrating a neat development in public transportation—omnibus, horse-car, El—with the old silenced by the new.

As Howells notes in *Impressions and Experiences* (1896), elevated trains normally add to street-level noise, creating an overbearing urban sensorium:

[T]he horse-cars run even under the elevated tracks, and no experience of noise can enable you to conceive of the furious din that bursts upon the sense, when at some corner two cars encounter on the parallel tracks below, while two trains roar and shriek and hiss on the rails overhead, and a turmoil of rattling express wagons, heavy drays and trucks, and carts, hacks, carriages, and huge vans rolls itself between and beneath the prime agents of the uproar . . . (258)

The aural is related to affect insofar as it is indescribable: “The noise is not only deafening, it is bewildering; you cannot know which side the danger threatens most” (258). Sound overwhelms the directional impulse, effectively blinding the urban stroller. James, indeed, described the El as “a sinister over-roofed clangorous darkness” (45 145). For one of Edith Wharton’s returning expatriates, “new” New York—that is, after the First World War—is a “fluid city . . . where the stoutest buildings seemed like atoms forever shaken into new patterns by the rumble of Undergrounds and Elevateds” (*Mother’s* 32).

The Marches are nostalgic: they think back to a time when the visual dominated the aural. The time is quite specific: it is their experience of Broadway in the 1870s, catalogued by Howells in *Their Wedding Journey* (1871). He first develops a distinction between the visual and the aural in the Niagara Falls portion of this travel narrative, which is less surprising when we consider that Broadway is likened to the Falls earlier in the novel (28). Speaking of the actual Niagara Falls, Howells writes: “[Basil and Isabel March] remembered afterwards how they were able to make use of but one sense at a time, and how when they strove to take in the forms of the descending flood they ceased to hear it; but as soon as they released their eyes from this service, every fibre in them vibrated to the sound, and the spectacle dissolved away in it” (*Wedding* 126). On its own, “[t]he eye could no longer take truthful note of quality, and now beheld the tumbling deluge as a Gothic wall of carven marble” (126). In other words, the eye tends to aestheticize experience—to make the unknowable known. The ear, meanwhile, “could give the brain no assurance of the sound that filled it, and whether it were great or little” (126). The aural is a bodily feeling—“every fibre in them vibrated to the sound”—that confounds meaning and hence representation. “It was only when the sight, so idle on its own behalf, came to the aid of the other sense, and showed them the mute movement of each other’s lips, that they dimly appreciated the depth of sound that involved them” (127). What Howells achieves, here, is the *representation* of affect. It is a representation that takes affect as both subject and proposed effect: he wants to paint a picture that can make his main characters and his readers appreciate the “depth of sounds that involved them.” This is a clever way to confront the un-representability of affect: instead of imposing an aesthetic form on excessive noise, Howells starts with a pictorial representation and allows affect to break from its grasp. After all, the image of two people trying and failing to talk hints indirectly but effectively at the vibrations that envelop them.

Similarly, the aural and hence affective experience of the El indirectly enters

Howells's *Hazard*, disrupting the visual supremacy of 1870s New York:

They kill the streets and avenues; but at least they partially hide them, and that is some comfort; and they do triumph over their prostrate forms with a savage exultation that is intoxicating. Those bends in the L that you get at the corner of Washington Square, and just below the Cooper Institute—they're the gayest thing in the world. Perfectly atrocious, of course, but incomparably picturesque! And the whole city is so . . . or else the L would never have got built here. New York may be splendidly gay or squalidly gay, but prince or pauper, it's gay always. (54)

Around the time that Howells wrote *Hazard*, *The New York Times* produced a handful of articles detailing the legal battle between landlords and railroad companies, which centered on the emotional and physical damages caused by the noisy structures literally pressed up against apartments, hotels, and schools. Typically, the lawyers for the El spoke of the benefits of having it close to hand²⁹ while landlords recalled the structural damages their buildings suffered. A January 1889 article describes the second kind of case:

Testimony was offered to show that the walls of the building had been cracked by the jarring caused by the stopping trains at the Grand-street station . . . Mr. O'Brien also says the clouds of smoke darken his upper windows and sometimes fill the rooms, rendering the building unfit for certain kinds of business. The noise of the trains, too, interfere with conversations in the stores and offices. ("Annoyed")

Using Howells's terms, the failed conversation between office mates demonstrates the "depth of sound that involved them" (*Wedding* 127). The reference to "the Cooper Institute" in *Hazard* (54) is interesting in this regard. In "1873 when the Third Avenue El opened adjacent to Cooper Union College, students complained that the train noise disrupted their classes" (Bronzaft 2). The El companies compensated the institute for the inconvenience.

Neither Howells nor March cares much for the financial remunerations (or lack thereof) dispensed on behalf of the elevated. This is why Howells could keep the "smiling aspects" passage in *Criticism and Fiction*, published a year after *Hazard*: the fight—whether in

²⁹ See, for example, "Jay Gould's Detectives."

the streets or the courtroom—between antagonistic social classes had to be acknowledged but then bracketed to represent a shared positive feeling in urban America. In line with this, March calls the El “incomparably picturesque” (54). Yet the “picturesque” does not function in the same way here as it does at earlier points in the novel. Starting within but moving beyond the constraints of earlier visual/literary categories, Howells tries to communicate the unspoken and unspeakable feeling created by these loud, vibrating structures for those caught in tis web. Using March as his mouthpiece, Howells sidesteps the socioeconomic implications of the El’s presence and instead focuses on the affective present: not only is the El personified in its “savage” triumph over the streets, the result is “intoxicating.”

If one looks outside of court reporting, there are records of intoxicating feelings passed between strangers on the El. A *New York Tribune* article from Christmas Eve in 1890 reads: “Men, women and children were packed together in regular New York elevated road fashion. The crowding and pushing was continuous, yet everybody suffered good-naturedly, as everybody should on the eve of the jolliest day of the year” (“Passengers”). The crowd’s positive reaction to what was once a negative—the pushing and shoving—becomes a measure of the good spirit and fellow-feeling awakened by the holidays. There is also a genre of lighthearted stories about the interesting characters one finds on the El. In one from 1889, a “thin-faced old gentleman, carrying a paper bandbox, came into a car on the Sixth-avenue elevated railroad at the Forty-second street station” and takes his seat amongst a varied cast of characters (“Mysterious”): two women discussing fashion; a man with his paper; “a pale, clerical-looking young man”; and, in a striking parallel to *Hazard*, a newlywed couple “discussing the merits of flats and boarding houses” (the Marches discuss the merits of flats versus homes on the El [53]). As the train clatters into the next station, Twenty-Eighth Street, the passengers hear a conductor yell out “Tweunuy-uth!” “The two young

women . . . were somewhat doubtful as to what the guard had said, and wished to make sure by a glance at the station sign. The same emotion had been aroused in the breasts of many other passengers. Only the thin-faced old gentleman with the bandbox seemed to retain perfect calmness.” In the end, we discover that inside the man’s bandbox is a parrot that has “[l]earned the name of every station on the line from the ferry to Forty-second street, and shouts ‘em out often.” It is a comical story—strangers share feelings of confusion while readers laugh at the introduction of the hidden parrot, which might be said to stand in for the discordant, confusing, seemingly source-less noise of the El itself.

What about those outside the train car, in the buildings lining the El? “Passengers,” Luc Sante writes, “enjoyed the opportunity to peer in, feasting their eyes on endless rows of tableaux vivants featuring men in undershirts and women in housedresses” (51). But, he goes on, “perhaps third-story occupancy did have its dubious pleasures, if one is to believe the 1882 *Police Gazette* illustration entitled ‘Shooting at the Elevated,’ which shows a soubrette in a hotel room aiming a revolver out the window” (51). Well-dressed hotel guests, wine glasses and cigarettes in hand, look on smiling, as if watching a show (they return the gaze, so to speak). Wharton’s unpublished poem “Terminus,” though not about New York, details the more erotic elements of staying in a hotel next to screeching trains. While spending a night of passion with her lover in London’s Charing Cross Hotel, Wharton “thought of those others, the nameless, the many, / Who perhaps thus had lain and loved for an hour on the brink of the world, / Secret and fast in the heart of the whirlwind of travel, / The shaking and shrieking of trains, the night-long shudder of traffic” (“Terminus”).

In *Hazard*, Howells wants to describe a feeling fit only for the razor’s edge of the present, where consequences are thrown out the window and strangers share a positive feeling. March names his feeling “gay,” which oscillates between “splendidly gay” and

“squalidly gay” (54). Kaplan suggests that “[h]is obsessive repetition of the word ‘gay’ levels all distinctions in meaning and refers to nothing but itself” (51). A free-floating, referent-less feeling is also how Jameson describes the affective charge of Tolstoy’s “happiness”: it “has preconditions but cannot be caused; and clearly, it cannot be the aim or end of any action or project” (*Antinomies* 82). The precondition of Howells’ “gay,” relating to the El (its overwhelming noise), is similarly displaced: the feeling seems to belong neither to the El nor the people on it, but rather encompasses both and, in fact, all of New York. Kaplan is wrong to conclude that the word also represses those that would disrupt the normal workings of the realist novel. Rather, it marks the emergence of the population that Wharton deems “the nameless, the many” (“Terminus”): “New York may be splendidly gay or squalidly gay, but prince or pauper, it’s gay always” (Howells, *Hazard* 54). Kaplan might claim that this description is a way for the bourgeois writer to control the socioeconomic rift in modern society by drawing on and imaginatively resolving the outmoded feudal split between prince and pauper. But the use of feudal language serves a more radical purpose by tacitly linking affect with democracy as the force capable of leveling unnatural social distinctions, then and now. Howells thus re-imagines the democratic revolution of the eighteenth century as an aesthetic force kept alive in the present moment by “the fleeting intimacy you for[m] with people in second- and third-floor interiors,” which levels the distinction between prince and pauper, bourgeois and proletariat, character and reader, past and present (*Hazard* 66).

This democratic leveling becomes even clearer later in the novel, in yet another long description of March’s feelings about the El:

He was interested in the insolence with which the railway had drawn its erasing lines across the Corinthian front of an old theater, almost grazing its fluted pillars and flouting its dishonored pediment. The colossal effigies of the fat women and the tuft-headed Circassian girls of cheap museums; the vistas of shabby cross streets; the survival of an old hip-roofed house here and there at their angles; the Swiss-chalet, histrionic decorativeness of the stations in prospect or retrospect; the vagaries of the

lines that narrowed together or stretched apart according to the width of the avenue, but always in wanton disregard of the life that dwelt, and bought and sold, and rejoiced or sorrowed, and clattered or crawled, around, below, above—were features of the frantic panorama that perpetually touched his sense of humor and moved his sympathy. Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and then the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay, of the weaker. The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder and the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead. (159-160)

If the “frantic panorama” moves in disregard to human life, its insolence recalls those individuals clattering along with or crawling under the El, which physically “touche[s] his sense of humor” (it is splendidly gay) as well as “his sympathy” (it is squalidly gay).

Though the rest of the passage is couched in the language of Social Darwinism (“struggle for existence,” etc.), March comes to recognize “the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead” (160). Through March, Howells deconstructs the discursive articulation between liberal individualism and Social Darwinism in American culture and politics.³⁰ If Nature is as “planless” and “Godless” as the Social Darwinists believe, then it will swallow up even their own master narrative and the proud individualists it produced. Antagonism is one name for this chaos which threatens self and society, which is here metaphorized as the brute power of Nature—that which “force[s] the forest from the soil to the sky” (160). One is reminded of George Eliot’s famous aside on (the limits of) realism in *Middlemarch* (1871-1872): “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (194). Howells finds the frequency of everyday

³⁰ See the introduction to this study. In chapter 3, I discuss Cahan’s subversion of Social Darwinian individualism.

life in the city—in the buildings adjacent to the El—and not in some imagined countryside. If only for a moment, March resonates with the affective forces once excluded from the realist novel; and those forces—which seemed so silent, so benign from the kinds of aesthetic distances Howells once set up in his novels—push, crawl, and clatter quite loudly when you are on their frequency, threatening to lead the realist novel into chaos.

To be on this frequency of pure affect and then return to report about it requires a new way of writing realism. Aware of this problem, Howells portrays the El as something that skates uneasily between Romance and a new kind of art:

[The Marches] often talked . . . of the superb spectacle, which in a city full of painters nightly works its unrecorded miracles; and they were just to the Arachne roof spun in iron over the cross street on which they ran to the depot; but for the present they were mostly inarticulate before it. They had another moment of rich silence when they paused in the gallery that leads from the elevated station to the waiting rooms in the Central Depot and looked down upon the great night trains lying on the tracks dim under the rain of gaslights that starred without dispersing the vast darkness of the place. What forces, what fates, slept in these bulks which would soon be hurling themselves north and east and west through the night! Now they waited there like fabled monsters of the Arab story ready for the magician's touch, tractable, reckless, will-less—organized lifelessness full of a strange semblance of life. (*Hazard* 66-67)

If the depot strikes the romantic chord of the “Arab story,” then the entire elevated system, encompassing the city like Arachne's web, “ma[kes] Reality its Romance,” as Howells once defined realism (*Selected* 328). However, in a city full of painters, the El goes “unrecorded.” Thus, the Marches remain silent before the “spectacle.” As at Niagara Falls, they *see* that they cannot or should not speak, which alludes to the depth of sound that envelops them.

Of course, Howells eventually breaks this silence. Yet, he remains tacitly aware of the formal and political impotence that follows his attempt to represent affect. Formal impotence comes from a narrative double bind: to speak about shared feeling at all is to pervert it, to render it susceptible to co-optation by named emotions. “Gay” is, of course, a named feeling, signaling that language has moved in to fill the silence of affect. Howells

repeats the word so that, as we saw, it appears free-floating and referent-less, signaling that March's feeling bursts language from within, rendering it impotent. Even this "solution" to the affect/named emotions antagonism is momentary: it occurs during what Bakhtin would call the slow, viscous time-space of the commute, which necessarily dissipates when the characters arrive at their destinations (an apartment or the office), where agonistic dialogues occur, problems are resolved, and the narrative moves forward.

Howells's turn to the El was motivated by his reading of the nationalists and collectivists, who hoped that public transport monopolies augured a more collective future. Howells draws this optimism into the present, giving up the overt political narrative of gradual centralization to focus on what it would feel like at a particular moment of that process. The non-narrative qualities of affect, however, preclude the possibility of any political platform (a set of demands, a manifesto) based around a crowded train car. Thus, the El in *Hazard* is not much different from the horse-car in *Suburban Sketches*: the affected passengers and apartment-dwellers do not come together as a democratic public. Failure is inevitable: affect never congeals into a political form with a history, an agenda, or a clear path towards the future. In fact, it destroys utopian agendas.

Kaplan claims that, after *Hazard*, "Howells stops exploring the dangerously shifting boundary lines of his urban representation, and turns to domestic and utopian fictions that remain within the untested perimeter of the foreground" (63). She references *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), in which a traveler from a utopian land, Altruria, visits a New England hotel and engages in agonistic debate with various American types. Kaplan's narrative is too simple, however: first, Howells's *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* (1893-1894), written around the same time, is decidedly urban—the visitor travels to New York City; and, finally, it is incorrect that "domestic and utopian" novels replaced realism. In his next New York novel,

The World of Chance (1893) Howells acknowledges, with a clarity missing from *Hazard* and the utopian romances, that utopianism based around public transportation is bound for political failure. The result leads Howells closer to American modernism than the utopian tradition.

VI. From *The World of Chance* to American Modernism

The World of Chance is about a young author named Percy Bysshe Shelley Ray who submits his subpar romance to the “world of chance” that is New York’s publishing market. A subplot involves a family of socialists that has moved to New York after leaving a Brook Farm-style commune because it remains out of touch with the problems of modern society. David Hughes, the family patriarch, is first introduced when Ray visits the home to find out if this man’s daughter, a reader at a publishing house, will give his novel a chance:

Ray found himself in what must be the principal room of the apartment; its two windows commanded an immediate prospect of the elevated road, with an effect of having their sills against its trestle work. Between them stood a tall, gaunt old man . . . [who] was saying: “. . . If I had back the years that I have wasted in a perfectly futile effort to deal with the problem of the race at a distance where I couldn’t touch it, I would have nothing to do with eremitism in any of its forms, either collectively as we have had it in our various communistic experiments, or individually on the terms which Tolstoi apparently advises.” (Howells, *World* 90)

Living next to the El means the Hughes family must make an impossible choice: “When we came here first, it was warm weather; it was stifling when we shut the windows, and when we opened them, it seemed as if the trains would drive us wild. It was like having them in the room with us” (102). “As the season advanced, and the heat within-doors increased, they had to open the windows, and then the infernal uproar of the avenue filled the room, so that they could not hear one another speak till the windows were closed again” (296). Once he steps inside one of the houses lining the El, Howells notices that nobody is “smiling.” Put differently, Howells’s “smiling” evaluation of the El speaks to the relatively well-off class on the train rather than the families whose lives are intruded upon by its overwhelming noise.

In his utopian romances, written around the same time as *The World of Chance*, Howells contemplates the potentially positive outcomes of these loud, invasive, dangerous machines. In his *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, Howells's utopian visitor Mr. Homos is surprised at the American defense of individual liberty and selfishness, which to him is out of touch with the reality of economic and political concentration in the El:

Every seat in them is taken, and every foot of space in the aisle between the seats is held by people standing, and swaying miserably to and fro by the leather straps dangling from the roofs. Men and women are indecently crushed together, without regard for that personal dignity which we [the Altrurians] prize, but which the Americans seem to know nothing of and care nothing for. The multitude overflows from the car, at either end, and the passengers are as tightly wedged on the platforms without as they are within. . . . Sometimes horrible accidents happen; a man clinging to the outside of the gate has the life crushed out of his body against the posts of the station as the train pulls out. But in this land, where people have such a dread of civic collectivism of any kind, lest individuality should suffer, the individual is practically nothing in the regard of the corporate collectivities which abound. (69)

In a dialectical reversal, Howells suggests that what looks bleak about the present—individuals are literally or figuratively crushed by public transit—augurs a more progressive future when the state will own all monopolies, eliminating the immoral individualism at the core of capitalist society. For the collectivist, such examples point toward a future where a plutocracy will be destroyed and replaced by a “real” democracy. Fittingly, Mr. Homos is unsure whether change in America will come about via revolution (the socialist way) or from a gradual progression in collective values due to the growing centralization of life, even if he hopes for the latter outcome (*Letters* 17). While Howells was still in his realist phase, he burrowed into the ambiguity of the present, where one could not be sure whether change will come, if at all, via revolution or through a gradual awakening of civic consciousness.

For a similar reason, Hughes sadistically enjoys the sounds of the city. While he admits that it is “atrocious,” he tells Ray that he is “glad [he] came and placed [himself] where [he] could fully realize the hideousness of a competitive metropolis”: “All these

abominations of sight and sound, these horrible discords, that offend every sense, physically express the spiritual principle underlying the whole social framework” (*World* 297). For Hughes, the overwhelming noise of the El in combination with regular street noise concretize a vision of a more collective urban lifestyle that might be generated if only people awakened to a sense of interconnection in the monopoly stage of capitalism. In this vein, Hughes imagines a city “without a horse, where electricity [will bring] every man and everything silently to the door” (297). The El augurs “the greatest possible monopoly; one that includes the whole people economically as they are now included politically” (119).

While Hughes’s utopian vision is tied to the development of urban transportation systems (the replacement of horses with machines), his life is threatened by an illness that is *exacerbated* by the noises of the El. As his condition worsens and his manifesto fails to find a publisher (while Ray’s romance does), Hughes begins to shut out the city as well as his hopes for the future: “The smells of the street, and the sick, hot whiffs from the passing trains were excluded; the powerful odors of the useless drug burdened the air” (318). Hughes winds up shutting out the noise of the El and reverting to his small circle of friends, which replicates the kind of eremitic lifestyle he hoped to avoid by moving to the city in the first place.

There is a simple formal reason why Howells cannot seem to usher in the reign of affect in his writing. The price to pay for absolutizing the affective realm of the everyday to the exclusion of plot and narration is that one stops writing a realist novel and enters the territory of modernist experimentation. A study of the afterlife of Howellsian realism in American modernism is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is worth noting that John Dos Passos, Hart Crane, Charles Reznikoff, and Henry Roth all turn to the image

of rapid transit systems crushing the life and souls of urban inhabitants.³¹ Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) is the best modernist novel to pair with Howells. The novel spans the growth of New York from the incorporation of the five boroughs in 1898 to the turbulent 1920s. The "plot," which revolves around a set of characters who only become knowable over time, is less important for Dos Passos than capturing the feeling of walking or riding public transit through the city at a certain moment in its history. The opening of each chapter leaves room for a description of everyday urbanism, told through snapshot-like images rife with accompanying smells, sounds, and tastes. One pertinent example:

Morning clatters with the first L down Allen street. Daylight rattles through the windows, shaking old brick houses, splatters the girders of the L structure with bright confetti. [. . .]

At the corner of Riverton the old man with the hempen beard who sleeps where nobody knows is putting out his picklestand. Tubs of gherkins, pimentos, melonrind, piccalilli give out twining vines and cold tendrils of dank pepperyfragrance that grow like a marshgarden out of the musky bedsmells and the rancid clangor of the cobbled awakening street. (123)

Later in this chapter, we are riding the next mode of transportation, overwhelmed by affect:

In the crammed subway car the messenger boy was pressed up against the back of a tall blond woman who smelled of Mary Garden. Elbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks, jiggled closer with every lurch of the screeching express. His sweaty Western Union cap was knocked onto the side of his head. If I could have a dame like dat, a dame like dat'd be wort havin de train stalled, de lights go out, de train wrecked. I could have her if I had de noive an de jack. As the train slowed up she fell against him, he closed his eyes, didn't breathe, his nose was mashed against her neck. The train stopped. He was carried in a rush of people out the door. (139)

Dos Passos, like many of his peers, ushers in the modernist emphasis on pure scenic description to the exclusion of the well-made plot. Howells, for his part, rides modern machinery as close as he can toward this representational sound barrier, blissfully ignorant of the new artistic form that lies in the wake of realism's sonic boom.

³¹ These are the works I have in mind: Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), Part VII, "The Tunnel"; Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925); Reznikoff's *Testimony* (1934-1978); Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934), Book IV, "The Rail."

Chapter 2

“Arched Over Friends as well as Enemies”:

Reproducing and Resolving Antagonisms in *The Bostonians*

In *The Bostonians* (1886), Henry James repeatedly visits the windows of Olive Chancellor’s Charles Street rowhouse to catch a view of Boston and its environs. Olive, a wealthy Boston feminist, shows off this view to her guests, including Basil Ransom (a distant cousin from the South) and Verena Tarrant (a young orator from Cambridge whom she hopes to recruit). James’s readers find detailed descriptions of what these characters perceive along the Charles River. Robert K. Martin writes that “[t]he first book of the novel is . . . framed by these landscape passages, which define its subject as Boston, and, more importantly, as ways of seeing” (79). For Martin, the two subjects are intertwined: James’s characters have romantic or sentimental “ways of seeing” that prevent them from truly perceiving Boston. The correct “way of seeing” is displayed in an oft-quoted passage:

The western windows of Olive’s drawing-room, looking over the water, took in the red sunsets of winter; the long, low bridge that crawled, on its staggering posts, across the Charles; the casual patches of ice and snow; the desolate suburban horizons, peeled and made bald by the rigour of the season; the general hard, cold void of the prospect; the extrusion, at Charlestown, at Cambridge, of a few chimneys and steeples, straight, sordid tubes of factories and engine-shops, or spare, heavenward finger of the New England meeting-house. There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railway-lines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horse-car, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles and bare wooden backs of places. (*The Bostonians* 135-36)¹

In Irving Howe’s influential “Introduction to *The Bostonians*,” this description stands for the “slowly accumulating seediness of the city as it stumbles into the factory age” (158) and

¹ Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BO*.

Martin continues this line of thinking: “The Boston of Transcendentalism is disappearing and being reshaped by a new urban reality,” which Martin characterizes as “a new industrial order” replete with “poverty and decay” (Martin 79, 78).

Verena, however, “thought such a view lovely” (James, *BO* 136). Looking out a different window, Ransom also suffers from what Martin calls “picturesque misperception”:

The view seemed to him very picturesque, though in the gathered dusk little was left of it save a cold yellow streak in the west, a gleam of brown water, and the reflection of the lights that had begun to show themselves in a row of houses, impressive to Ransom in their extreme modernness, which overlooked the same lagoon from a long embankment on the left, constructed of stones roughly piled. (*BO* 14)

Martin wants us to notice that James qualifies this “picturesque” vision with the concrete details of urban space, thereby pointing up the city’s “all-too-real sordidness” (Martin 79).

By describing the “reality” of this landscape as one of poverty and decay, however, Martin fails to explore one of the implications of his argument: the landscape is being “reshaped by a new urban reality” (79). Far from falling into decay, the city is being rebuilt on new foundations, signified by the modern houses on “stones roughly piled” (James, *BO* 14). Amy Kaplan argues that “[r]ealists show a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world ‘out there’” and that “the weightiness of descriptive detail,” which we certainly get in the passages above, “often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality” (9). Thus, “the urban-industrial transformation of nineteenth-century society did not provide a ready-made setting which the realistic novel reflects, but [rather] these changes radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation” (8). The world of the novel, like the city it represents, is under construction.

Betsy Klimasmith and Janet Wolf Bowen have read *The Bostonians* through the lens of the evolving city. Instead of suffering from misperception, James’s characters, in their readings, anxiously confront and try to redefine the changing relationship between public

and private space. According to Klimasmith, “the very notions of privacy and domesticity must be reconfigured spatially in response to new urban realities” (53). Olive’s rowhouse is initially buffered against “new urban realities” (Klimasmith pluralizes Martin’s description), but her home eventually becomes a waystation for various characters throughout the novel, “transform[ing] [it] from a place of respite to a node in the developing networks of transportation and communication” (68). The characters frequently travel to and from Olive’s apartment via the horse-car and engage in agonistic dialogue, echoing the function played by the *Every Other Week* office and the El, respectively, in *Hazard*.² Thus, according to Bowen, who similarly traces a fall from domestic grace, Olive’s apartment is “the perfect symbol for the fluidity of interior and exterior being, home and homelessness, and private and public life during the final decades of the nineteenth century in America” (4).

If a rowhouse is the symbol for the fluidity of the public/private divide, then Lynn Wardley helps us see that Olive’s window is the conduit through which these two zones enter *The Bostonians* and are (re)defined in terms of one another: “If from one perspective the suburbs threaten to enter Olive’s home, from another they are safely framed within it, made a feature of its decor” (650). The signification of the public/private divide at Olive’s window accounts for the two perspectives in Martin’s account—the narrator’s view of urban blight and the characters’ picturesque misperception—without the assurance that the narrator is correct: the window is either a barrier or a passageway to the world, leading to a lovely, framed picture for one person and a sense of impending urban encroachment for another.

Klimasmith makes this link between the public/private distinction and the interpretations of the landscape not via the characters’ perspectives but in the

² See James, *BO* 61, 73, 121, 165. James, like Howells, associates the horse-car with Boston (note the “universal horse-car” in the long passage above [135]) and the El with New York. In New York, Basil and Verena travel from Olive’s temporary apartment on Tenth Street “up to the Central Park by the elevated railway” (252).

(mis)perception of other critics: “[m]ost discussions of Olive[’s] Charles Street home . . . focus on the house’s interior, and implicitly extend [her] class status to the neighborhood that surrounds her” (87). The neighborhood is thus an extension of the apartment, “a feature of its decor” (Wardley 650). In this camp we have Bowen, who assumes that Olive lives in a Back Bay rowhouse, and Howe, who calls Olive a “St. Theresa of Beacon Hill” (“Introduction” 165). “While placing Olive’s rowhouse in the Back Bay or Beacon Hill offers coherence to Olive’s bluestocking spinsterhood, it obscures the reality of Charles Street in the 1880s” (Klimasmith 87). Interestingly, Howe and Bowen disagree about where Olive lives even as they make the same mistake of projecting her “home culture” onto her neighborhood (James, *BO* 71). Instead of trying to understand why this discrepancy arises, however, Klimasmith describes what *she* sees as the reality of Charles Street, adding a third neighborhood to the mix: “given its river view, Olive’s section of the street would have been considered part of the West End, the working-class tenement neighborhood” (87). Not only is the view seedy or lovely, but Olive’s apartment is located amongst the Boston Brahmin of Beacon Hill, the nouveau riche of the Back Bay, or the working classes of the West End.

Clearly, we need to be careful when ascribing a “reality” to the social world of the novel. After all, even those critics who are attentive to the fluid public/private distinction wind up trying to reify Olive Chancellor’s place in Boston. To get around this trap, we should not ask where Olive lives and what is true about the neighborhood or landscape but why it is so hard to tell where she lives and why the space outside her window means different things to different people. And how does James represent this ever-changing, conflicted, and seemingly inaccessible space? The lesson is clear: rather than offering one “way of seeing” as *the* “way of seeing” we should pay attention to the formal innovations James deploys to make sense of a contradictory or, better, antagonistic urban space.

In what follows, I will argue that James, his characters, and his critics are experiencing a failure to map Boston after a postbellum landfill project upset the city's defined neighborhood lines. "Boston" only comes to cohere as an object of representation through an empty signifier of togetherness—what Slavoj Žižek, by way of Claude Lévi-Strauss, calls the "zero-institution." The "zero-institution" "has no positive, determinate function—its only function is the purely negative one of signalling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos" ("Architectural" 267). In Žižek's reading, the "zero-institution" is "ideology at its purest" by resolving social antagonism and enabling communal living (266). It is also homologous with Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony, described by Mark Wenman "as a form of order *as such*, set against the backdrop of an inherent threat of social disintegration" (191). Brought to bear on the study of the novel, however, the "zero-institution" seems to confirm Kaplan's thesis under a different name: American literary realists "actively construc[t] the coherent social world they represent" against the threat of urban-industrial "unreality" (9, 20). James, I argue, distinguishes himself by being aware of the antagonistic limits of his representation while holding up the "zero-institution" as a valuable meaning-making tool.

Recall the terms of James's famous preface to *Roderick Hudson*: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (*Literary* 1041). In the introduction, I argued that this statement makes possible a conception of hegemony and social antagonism within the American realist novel. Hegemony and realist representation make sutures within the fabric of everyday life, though there are countless holes capable of producing different kinds of aesthetic and political work:

a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon beg[i]n[s] to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations

for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. (1041)

Antagonism marks the experience of the limits of this meaning-making process, where the endless relations of everyday life—the surplus of possible configurations within the canvas—bleed through the suture; or, what amounts to the same thing, where the “continuity” of the canvas is shown, as in a close-up, to consist of more “holes” whose function is “to invite, to solicit, to persuade, to practise positively a thousand lures and deceptions” (1041). The constitutive surplus and missing-ness of “the social” (Laclau and Mouffe) opens the possibility for authors identifying with the realist project to test the limits of representation by bringing readers’ attention to voices and bodies, subjects and situations that have not been given representation, aesthetically or politically, and whose spectral presence, when brought into the open, calls into question the social/aesthetic totality.

James, however, is more interested in the aesthetic and political function of the sutures than he is in uncovering the violence, oppression, and injustice—as well as their triumphant if momentary reversals—at the site of antagonism. Howells, we saw in the last chapter, wants desperately to break outside the bounds of his own novelistic totality, and by stressing James’s preference for “scene” over “drama” at that.³ James instead simplifies “the social” to aid representation. After all, he implores the artist faced with the canvas of everyday life to begin “an immense counting of holes and a careful selection among them,” even though those holes can deceive and even though the embroiderer wants “to cover and consume as many holes as possible” (*Literary* 1041). To translate, he must choose a subject (a set of relations) and a location (a hole in the canvas). After returning to the Boston area⁴ in

³ See Jameson, *Antinomies* 22.

⁴ Born in New York City in 1843, James travelled around Europe with his family for most of his childhood. After returning to the U.S., the James family lived on Ashburton Place in Boston in 1864 and then Quincy Street in Cambridge starting in 1868. In 1875, Henry made the decision to leave for Europe because it provided

the early 1880s following the deaths of his parents, James wrote: “the most salient and peculiar point in our social life,” which he felt Boston localized, “[is] the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf” (*Notebooks* 20).

Unlike Wharton, whose novels critique gender oppressions despite her own conservatism,⁵ James displays no understanding of or sympathy with the Woman Movement. For James, as we will see, “the agitation” for women’s rights is intricately tied to the problem of urban representation and hence to the material growth of Boston; or, in Wardley’s words, “modern women had colluded with those modern, material forces at work to upset Boston’s established configuration” (644). In *The Bostonians*, James simplifies “the social” and aids representation in three related steps: 1) by naming the “new urban reality” making Boston hard to map; 2) by rewriting his metaphor for artistic production to articulate an antagonism between a male canvas and female embroiderers in the production of urban space; and 3) by attempting to resolve that antagonism to aid representation. To move from point 2 to 3, James teaches us the ideological function of the “zero-institution,” *avant la lettre*, with a visit to a Civil War monument that appears to “arc[h] over friends as well as enemies,” ostensibly suturing an antagonistic nation while celebrating the North (BO 189). He draws this function into the novel through Verena Tarrant, an empty signifier of an orator who can be influenced by a partisan political position even as the sound of her voice magically unifies an audience. James uses her voice to resolve the gender antagonism at the heart of his novel, making Boston cohere as an object of representation even as he shows that a single political

better opportunities for him as a writer, though he continued to publish in Eastern U.S. periodicals. Boston and Cambridge, we should note, are distinct cities but James called the latter “the particular *Boston neighborhood* . . . with which I had been formerly somewhat acquainted” (*American Scene* 45, emphasis mine)

⁵ See chapter 4.

position will benefit from this sense of unity.⁶ This story will be told across different scales of space (the national, the urban, the architectural, and the bodily), demonstrating that antagonism goes all the way up and all the way down in a democracy, despite, or rather *because of*, the “zero-institution.” This is James’s and Žižek’s shared lesson: the “zero-institution,” whatever form it takes—a preconscious idea, a piece of architecture, or a sonorous voice—always reproduces a social antagonism in the name of resolving it.

I. The Changing Scales of Boston

Hsuan Hsu’s work on the multilayered, conflicting “scales” of geographical identification in American literature (“home, region, city, nation, and globe” [1]) allows us to better understand the fluid relationship between public and private space in *The Bostonians* as well as the different (extra) textual perspectives of the same landscape. These interpretive problems arise from what Hsu calls “scale enlargement” in the nineteenth-century city, which signifies its physical growth as well as its connections to national and international markets. Hsu argues that such “scale enlargement affected representations of urban interiors” by “expos[ing] such tightly circumscribed spaces to the oblique influence of larger geographic scales” (57). In one sense, this argument echoes Klimasmith and Bowen on *The Bostonians*: the urban apartment is the locus where public and private overlap. However, Hsu goes one step further: “Large cities gave rise to experiences of scale enlargement in which writers, characters, and readers felt—but could not quite comprehend—the effects of an unrepresentable and unprecedented global space” (58). The “ways of seeing” catalogued above represent the failure of cognitive mapping as the city expands in size: James, his

⁶ If James had written Howells’s *Hazard*, in other words, he would have focused on the simultaneously unifying and antagonistic function of the EI, which is itself a kind of “zero institution” for New York. Instead of anxiously trying to reach “the other half,” James would have zeroed-in on the political struggle to control the baseline sense of civic unity established by the interconnected web of public transportation.

characters, and his readers are having trouble locating themselves and others within (descriptions of) urban spaces that exist at the intersection of multiple scales of space.

In his notebooks, James writes about *The Bostonians* in a way that exposes a similar slippage between scales in Hsu's account: the novel will be "as local, as American, as possible, and as full of Boston" (*Notebooks* 19).⁷ The scales of Boston are hinted at in the second landscape that Olive's apartment looks out onto, this time through her dining-room window: "the dusky, empty river, spotted with points of light" (James, *BO* 16). This "view of the Back Bay" (324) signals at least three things to James's readers. Most simply, it refers to the brackish Back Bay of the Charles River. It also "describes an extensive area which was created by filling in the tidal flats of the Back Bay; [and finally,] understood in a sociological sense it refers to the smaller residential district which . . . has been the home of well-to-do Bostonians" since the last few decades of the nineteenth century (Bunting 1). Indeed, this is the up-and-coming but still unfinished neighborhood where the titular social-climbing millionaire builds his home in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. "It was found necessary to dig for the kitchen; at that point the original salt marsh lay near the surface, and before they began to put in the piles for the foundation they had to pump. The neighborhood smelt like the hold of a ship after a three years' voyage" (43). This is more than a mere metaphor, since the neighborhood is bordered by water on the Beacon Street side: "The Back Bay spread its glassy sheet before them, empty but for a few smaller boats and a large schooner . . . which a tug was rapidly towing toward Cambridge" (54). Olive's dining room thus looks out onto a residential landfill and "a brackish expanse of anomalous character, which is too big for a river and too small for a bay" (James, *BO* 14). When Ransom looks westward from Olive's

⁷ Although the finished product has significant moments in Cambridge, New York, and Cape Cod, I propose that we take James's claim about the centrality of Boston (indicated by the title) seriously.

parlor window, he sees houses of “extreme modernness” and “a long embankment . . . constructed of stones roughly piled” (14), which is his first glimpse of the landfill, though Olive later “giv[es]” him a fuller view of “the Back Bay” in her dining room (16).⁸

Figure 2, an 1858 photograph looking west from Boston’s State House, offers a “before” view of the Back Bay (Charles Street is parallel to the water on the right-hand side of the perpendicular embankment). Between the 1850s and the 1870s, a landfill (fig. 3) was built along the western (left-hand) side of the Mill-dam, the dam-cum-road stretching away from us in the figures, connecting Boston and Brookline (this is most likely the “embankment” with adjacent modern houses James references).⁹ The finished product was shaped into a grid pattern with boulevards modeled after those in Haussmann’s Paris. “A civic project funded with public monies” (Domosh 104), the Commonwealth thus helped build this residential enclave for some of Boston’s wealthiest citizens. As if in compensation, developers reserved plots of the new land for public institutions that would contribute to the civic good but also increase the price of adjacent properties.¹⁰ A *Boston Globe* article from 1872 outlines the stunning changes to the city in a relatively short timeframe:

Bostonians who have been absent from their native city for a few years, return to express astonishment as they regard the rapid growth of the city. . . . Old landmarks and localities have almost completely disappeared, and about one-half of Boston to-day is built upon made ground, reclaimed from the tide waters. The Back Bay—scene of past skatings, and boatings, and smeltings, and snipe shootings, has vanished, giving place to palatial residences, elegant parks, superb avenues, and scores of stone churches whose architectural beauty cannot be excelled (qtd. in Holleran 27)

⁸ The editors of the Penguin edition of *The Bostonians* describe this view quite clearly: “The rear of Olive’s house on Charles Street—one of the city’s oldest and most select—looks west towards Back Bay, and north-west over the river toward Cambridge” (BO 380 n. 1). Because Olive’s parlor incorporates a view of Cambridge and Charlestown, Klimasmith believes that Olive’s home is on the northern portion of Charles Street bordering the West End. However, to glimpse the Back Bay so clearly, Olive’s home would have had to be farther south on Charles Street, though it is not clear where.

⁹ In Howells’ novel, the Laphams “crossed the Milldam into Longwood; and here, from the crest of the first upland, stretched two endless lines, in which thousands of cutters went and came” (*Lapham* 35).

¹⁰ See Bunting 394.



Figure 2: Boston's Back Bay, "Before"
Source: Boston Athenaeum



Figure 3: Boston's Back Bay, "After"
Source: Boston Athenaeum

After moving to Europe in 1875, James made three trips back to the Boston area—two nearly consecutive trips in the early 1880s “after six years of absence” (November 1881-May 1882; December 1882-August 1883) and another in 1904/05 (a trip that yielded *The American Scene*)—where he saw the small city of his youth transformed by the filling of the Back Bay (*Notebooks* 214). In *The American Scene*, James describes the Back Bay in terms that give a negative spin to the astonishment of the *Boston Globe*’s hypothetical expatriate. Describing a walk down Charles Street, for example, James associates the “new land” with a logic of expansion that encompasses the Back Bay and the entire American scene:

It is from [Charles Street] southward that the new splendours of Boston spread, and will clearly continue to spread, but it opened out to me as a tract pompous and prosaic, with which the little interesting city . . . had had absolutely nothing to do. This disconnection was complete, and the southward, the westward territory made up . . . a platform or stage from which the other, the concentrated Boston of history, the Boston of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes . . . and the rest . . . could be seen in as definite. . . . Where the “new land” corresponds most to its name, rejoices most visibly and complacently in its newness, its dumped and shoveled foundations, the home till recently of a mere vague marine backwater, there the long, straight residential avenues . . . testify with a perfection all their own to a whole vast side of American life. (*AS* 181-82)

Although he made few notes about Boston during his 1880s visits, James does work his reactions to the new space into *The Bostonians*. Above, I indicated that the interpretations of the city outside Olive’s window are related to the “new urban reality” blurring the distinction between public and private. More specifically, I claimed that there are two ways that characters can experience these overlapping scales, one that produces a “lovely,” framed view and another that leads to a fear of incursion. A similar situation arises in a debate between Olive and a fellow Bostonian over the status of the Back Bay. Mrs. Farrinder, a leader in the feminist movement, “wanted to know why [Olive] shouldn’t stir up some of her friends down there on the Mill-dam” (James, *BO* 28). By using the name of the old dam/road extending across the Bay, which Beacon Street literally buried and replaced, she

establishes continuity between two moments in Boston's history (which James will later associate with a romantic "way of seeing").¹¹ Mrs. Farrinder also mends the break between Back Bay and old Boston by assuming that Olive's "place in the Boston hierarchy" (28) aligns her with the new land, conflating two kinds of "places" (social and geographic) in the process. This is perhaps what leads Bowen to place Olive's home in Back Bay. There is historical precedent for the association, even if Olive does not live there. "The Back Bay was a women's space," Sarah Deutsch notes, "because it was littered with women's organizations and because as early as the 1880s about 30 percent of the Back Bay's residential lots were owned by women and 60 percent of the area's residents were female" (12).

Olive, meanwhile, updates Mrs. Farrinder's lingo and, in so doing, also complicates the latter's conflation of Beacon Street and wealth: she "hated to hear [Beacon Street] talked about as if it were such a remarkable place, and to live there were a proof of worldly glory. All sorts of inferior people lived there" (BO 28). Although this lends credence to Klimasmith's contention that she lives in the working-class West End, Kevin Lynch points out, in his seminal study of cognitive mapping in Boston, that "Beacon Street is primarily in the Back Bay but relates to Beacon Hill by its name" (52). Olive is unclear about which neighborhood she aligns herself with: she dissociates her social and geographic "position" from the Back Bay by referencing Beacon Street's inferiority—as if she *wants it* to be part of the West End—but neglects the fact that this "fine avenue" is both attached to Beacon Hill (the neighborhood associated with Charles Street) and runs across the newly-filled Bay (James, BO 28). Olive's clarification of her own "position" is thus steeped in ambiguity.¹²

¹¹ While James sympathizes with the "Charles Street ghosts" (181), who take the pessimistic perspective, he also tries "to . . . make the real romantic claim" for the "vanished objects" of old Boston (169).

¹² Although the interviewees in Lynch's *The Image of the City* are able to locate Back Bay, Charles Street "acts ambiguously" and fulfills different functions "for various people at various times" (65).

After Olive convinces Mrs. Farrinder of her inability to “wake up the Back Bay!” (as a metonym for the wealthy women who live there, this statement confuses public and private) the latter jumps scales of geographical identification (53): Olive “might [make] liberal donations to a fund for the diffusion among the women of America of a more adequate conception of their public and private rights” (30). The implication is that public and private have yet to be adequately “mapped” on either a local or a national level. Put more broadly, then: the critics’ inability to decide where Olive lives, the lovely/seedy divide, the Olive-Mrs. Farrinder debate are all part of a collective failure to map the conflicting scales (public and private, local and national) created by the filling of the Back Bay.

It is worth pointing out here that Howells’s depiction of Boston in the throes of urbanization, written three years before James’s novel though set after the 1870s timeframe of *The Bostonians*, lacks confusion over neighborhood lines and alliances. In fact, returning to the language of chapter 1, everything in Howells’s Boston is easily known and categorized: the “New Land” represents (allegorizes, even) the shaky foundations on which the nouveau riche build their place in society. Thus, as Carlo Rotella notes, “[t]he novel’s elegantly intertwined money plot and family plot are arranged on the armature provided by this figure of urban development” (5). When the still-unfinished Lapham house is accidentally burned down, completing Lapham’s financial ruin, it is clear to the reader that the solid foundations of Beacon Hill and its established elite—represented by the Corey family and their understatedly beautiful mansion on Beacon Hill—are held up as the only viable alternative. James takes a wholly different approach. His Back Bay is a truly overdetermined¹³ space whose signification for the citizens of Boston is as in flux and un-finished as the urban

¹³ I take this term from Laclau and Mouffe, who borrow it from Freud and Althusser. It names “a very precise type of fusion entailing a symbolic dimension and a plurality of meanings” (94).

landscape itself—it is at once a river, a landfill, and a neighborhood that can be both attached to or detached from the more established Boston landscapes and neighborhoods. James thus captures the un-knowability and confusion of urban flux far more successfully than Howells, at least until the latter’s New York novels (*Hazard* and *The World of Chance*).

James’s masterstroke, perhaps, is to show this overdetermined, unfinished space only through a window, giving it a spectral presence felt in its deforming effects on the characters’ maps of the city. It thus becomes a site for marking the limits of Boston as an object of realist representation—the place where its differences and cultural significations threaten to dissolve into the void, not of non-meaning but a surplus of possible meanings. Indeed, if there is no correct “way of seeing” the landscape—only so many competing perspectives of the same, multi-layered space—then every description of Boston, including the author’s, runs the risk of being purely subjective and any interpretation of those descriptions the result of side-taking (*this* “way of seeing” is correct). For one of James’s American realist novels—as opposed to his modernist experiments with point of view later in his career—it is not enough to say that subjective positioning is a solution to problems introduced by emergent scales.¹⁴ James’s problem can be framed as follows: how does the city cohere as an object of realist representation despite the conflicting perspectives presented in the text?

For Hsu, “multiple, shifting, and at times contradictory allegiances to home, city, nation, and globe” are threats to representation and problems an author can resolve (92). Literature, Hsu argues, with a nod both to Jameson’s project of cognitive mapping and James’s canvas metaphor, can register the pressure of and ideologically resolve the social and spatial problems created by a “crisis of scale” by creating “new relations between individual subjects . . . and the fascinatingly, frighteningly immense spaces entailed by global capital”

¹⁴ See Jameson, *Postmodernism* 411–12.

(92). It will be helpful to work through Hsu's references, Jameson and James, to understand precisely how this works.¹⁵ Jameson takes his concept of cognitive mapping from Kevin Lynch's work on Boston, "[t]ranscoding [it] into the very different problematic of the Althusserian definition of ideology" (*Postmodernism* 52). Cognitive mapping takes the missing place of the Symbolic—i.e., representation through recognizable codes—in Althusser's Lacanian definition of ideology as "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence" (Althusser qtd. in *Postmodernism* 51). Though postmodernism is marked by the failure of cognitive mapping, a dialectical reversal would mean harnessing the power of ideology so that "we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects" (54). James's artist does something strikingly similar: faced with the endless relations of everyday life, he makes them *appear* to stop somewhere.

As James's notebook entry on *The Bostonians* makes clear, however, the largest scale in this novel is not the global but the national. Ann Brigham helpfully limits the scales of *The Bostonians* to the "urban, regional, and national," preventing the (interpretive and scalar) leap into international markets: "From the seemingly mappable pairs of North/South, Boston/Cambridge, and Boston/New York to the more conceptual couplings of public/private, exterior/interior, and local/national, *The Bostonians* is replete with places staked out, contiguous, and contested" (7, 6). She has also done the work of locating the unique solution that James draws upon to help capture these "seemingly mappable" scales. The key to her analysis is that these scales are evoked during the Memorial Hall sequence, when Verena leads Ransom, her suitor and political rival, on a tour of Harvard's architectural commemoration of the Civil War. Memorial Hall stands virtually alone in space, set off from other buildings, where it (re)creates the conflicting scales of urban experience—

¹⁵ See Hsu 75-77 for a comparison between James and Jameson on cognitive mapping.

public/private (it is a public monument at a private university), local/national (the local structure commemorates a national event)—but as a Civil War memorial it mediates the core difference evoked by these scales (North/South) by “erasing the difference of their causes” with a plea for “national, rather than local, loyalty” (10, 11).

Brigham shows how the reference to the Union at Memorial Hall motivates the marital “union” between Ransom and Verena at the end of the novel. Architecture thus acts as a go-between for the “seemingly mappable” scales of a growing urban space and local, everyday experience (6). While she is correct to read the resolution of the heterosexual romance as a rescaling of the Union at Memorial Hall, she misses an important paradox: James goes to smaller scales of experience—first architecture and then a courtship plot—to resolve the problem of representation introduced by the city. But the marital “union” between Ransom and Verena is not the only characterological resolution offered: for most of the novel, Verena is involved in an intimate intellectual and personal relationship with Olive. Verena’s “unions” with both Ransom and Olive are as political as they are personal. Olive and Ransom, I argue, both want to win over Verena because, like Memorial Hall, she can resolve the formal and political tensions in the novel’s treatment of urban space.

Before we can understand how a character functions like a building, however, we need a theoretical paradigm that can help explain how architecture can aid the project of cognitive mapping.¹⁶ To this end, I will now turn to Žižek’s explication of the “zero-institution,” which describes how a community with an antagonistic divide remains stable by reference to an empty signifier of togetherness. While he acknowledges that the “zero-institution” performs a similar function to Jamesonian ideology, Žižek “applies the same

¹⁶ In Jameson’s famous example, postmodern architecture, specifically Los Angeles’ Bonaventure Hotel, confounds cognitive mapping rather than aiding it. See *Postmodernism* 39-44.

type of analysis to urbanism and architecture” (“Architectural” 266). The “architectural zero-institution” will help us move from urbanism as a problem for representation to architecture as a formal solution that does its ideological work by drawing the world into two camps and appearing to resolve their irresolvable deadlock with a reference to collective identity.

II. The Architectural Zero-Institution

The “zero-institution” originated as the solution to a problem of cognitive mapping. After he asked them to sketch a map of their village, Claude Lévi-Strauss found that members of the Winnebago tribe produced two very different drawings depending on which of the tribe’s two subgroups the mapmaker belonged to. According to Žižek, the divergent maps of the same space are produced because of a fundamental antagonism within that society. The “zero-institution,” a term Lévi-Strauss uses to describe the sense of tribal unity that prevents social disintegration, is then “the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves” (“Architectural” 268). A “zero-institution” is the ideology that allows those who produce fundamentally different cognitive maps to imagine themselves as part of the same collectivity.

While American society has its own zero-institution, with the classic example being the “nation,” it also projects this foundational sense of togetherness into the built environment. In the postmodern era, Žižek writes, certain buildings “bea[r] the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives” in the form they take, often as two or more dialectically-opposed positions, only to then mediate between or resolve them (“Architectural” 255). For instance, there is a “series of oppositions which performance-arts buildings have to deal with: public/private, open/restrained, elite/popular—all variations of the basic motif of the class struggle . . . The space of these oppositions delineates the

problems to which performance-arts buildings are proposed solutions” (Žižek, *Living* 269). These “architectural zero-institutions” become “islands of meaning” open to all in a divided world (257). Nonetheless, the democratic ideals displayed by these buildings do not make them, for Žižek, mere screens for class relations: “it is not only that the fantasy embodied in the mute language of buildings can articulate the utopia of justice, freedom, and equality betrayed by actual social relations; this fantasy can also articulate a *longing for inequality*” (255). Or, as Žižek puts it using Jameson’s terminology: “The effective message of the ‘political unconscious’ of these buildings is *democratic exclusivity*: they create a multi-functional egalitarian open space, but the very access to this space is invisibly filtered and controlled” (“Architectural” 284). Thus, the architectural zero-institution retains or, better, actively recreates a core social antagonism that structures individual experience.

Although Žižek maintains that the architectural zero-institution is unique to the postmodern era¹⁷ and centers around the class struggle, his framework can help articulate the function of architecture in *The Bostonians*. Memorial Hall, for example, is a Reconstruction-era architectural “zero-institution.” A space unto itself, the structure reproduces the scales of modern life: it is public and private, local and national, and recalls the war between North and South. In Žižek’s framework, the goal is to read a building’s (scalar) oppositions (public/private, local/national) and related “ways of seeing” (sectionalist loyalties) as not only responses to but also as attempts to resolve a sociopolitical deadlock. Memorial Hall displaces the deadlock between North and South onto a neutral third party: the names of the student-soldiers killed in battle, found on tablets in a vestibule at the center of the building.

¹⁷ If one were to insist upon the postmodern nature of Žižek’s analysis, I would point to those critics, like Hsu, who locate the features that will later be associated with postmodernism lurking in James’s work. My claim here is that if James uncovers a pseudo-postmodern “crisis of scale” he also intuitively finds its architectural solutions.

The moment he steps inside the vestibule, Ransom “forgot . . . the whole question of sides and parties . . . [the monument] arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph” (James, *BO* 189). Yet, the names of Harvard students who died for the Confederate cause (257 fought, 64 died) are omitted: the feeling of national unity belies support for the North. Thus, in Brigham’s words, “[a] union . . . does not signify a seamless merger or dissolution of parts into a greater whole. Rather, the metaphor describes a system that brings together two parts that both interlock and push against each other,” which could also be a description of the “zero-institution” (18). The “zero-institution,” at Memorial Hall, is achieved by the evocation of the union, which not only brings together North (the Union in the particular sense) and South but retains a political divide under the surface (they push back apart), positioning Ransom as a defeated outsider.

Memorial Hall might then serve as an aesthetic and political lesson for an artist: divergent “ways of seeing” need not lead to cultural relativism but can be resolved with a reference to the national “union.” The only question left is the “hegemonic” one of “how this zero-institution will be . . . coloured by some particular signification” (Žižek, “Architectural” 268). This interpretation stipulates that a single social deadlock sits at the heart of mutually exclusive “ways of seeing” and the building’s materialization of the latter.¹⁸ For Žižek, the central antagonism that ideology reproduces and “resolves” is the class struggle; and the secret political meaning of the “architectural zero-institution” always benefits the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the split between North and South is what “the union”

¹⁸ Žižek reserves the term “parallax gap” for what I have described as competing “ways of seeing” and the antagonistic deadlock between them: “The parallax gap is not just a matter of our shifting perspective (from this standpoint, a building looks like this—if I move a little bit, it looks different . . .); things get interesting when we notice that the gap is inscribed into the ‘real’ building itself—as if the building, in its very material existence, bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives” (“Architectural” 253). From here, “the task is . . . to conceive all possible positions as responses to a certain underlying deadlock or antagonism, as so many attempts to resolve this deadlock” (255).

at Memorial Hall both resolves and sustains. However, as Brigham points out, in *The Bostonians* “geographical difference is reconciled with the reassertion of gender and sexual difference. That is, the two are imbricated” (14). Indeed, as we will see, the scene at the monument gives way to an argument about women’s role in public life. For now, I want to alert us to Brigham’s use of the word “imbricated,” as it evokes the possibility that one “difference” might be at the bottom of this stack of scales, in what Žižek would call the antagonistic core of ideology. As such, it would not be one social difference among many but a core deadlock, an impassable and irresolvable tear at the center of “the social.”

We can be more specific than “gender and sexual difference” as the core deadlock in question. In a letter to his editor written from Boston in 1883, which James copied in his personal notebook, he named “the most salient and peculiar point in our social life . . . the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf” (*Notebooks* 20). In *The American Scene*, James similarly defines “the intersexual relation” as “*the* feature of the social scene,” this time describing “a queer deep split or chasm between the two stages of personal polish . . . at which the sexes have arrived” (51). James in fact places a “queer split or chasm” between the sexes at the heart of the *urban* fabric. Indeed, after noting that Cambridge, Massachusetts has “a more embroidered surface” than he remembers and wondering “how far [it] might . . . go” (45), he genders the metaphor: “American life may . . . fall upon the earnest view as a society of women ‘located’ in a world of men . . . the men supplying, as it were, all the canvas, and the women all the embroidery” (52). James rewrites, by drawing together, his metaphor for artistic production and urban growth. Matching metaphors, women and authors make meaning by circumscribing a sphere of aesthetic relations within a masculine urban canvas that is never ending and constitutively torn open.

When we pay attention to the gender metaphor in isolation, however, we note that

“[w]omen are complexly necessary to, and separated from, the male world” (McNamara 27). This points to an *antagonism* between the masculine canvas and the feminine embroiderers. Each side in the “intersexual relation” defines and yet sets limits on the other’s contrasting role (James, *AS* 51). Indeed, James notes “[the] apparent privation, for the man, of his right kind of woman, and [the] apparent privation, for the woman, of her right kind of man” (51). There is only mutual “privation” between men and women, which, to transcode, Žižek would call “lack”¹⁹ and Jameson, following Sartre, would call “scarcity.”²⁰ Privation leads to antagonism insofar as the other has prevented self and society from becoming a harmonious whole: neither man nor woman finds an equal and willing partner in their work. “Insofar as there is antagonism,” Laclau and Mouffe write, “I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence” (111). We should also note James’s use of metaphor to describe this relation, as with his account of urban growth and artistic production: “antagonism . . . situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it—that is, as metaphor” (Laclau and Mouffe 111).²¹

Despite its apparent homology with postmodern theories of antagonism, one could argue that James’s metaphor relies on an outmoded separation of spheres and duties for men and women to go along with an overarching gender essentialism. However, the metaphor is more complex than this; it will be worthwhile to pause and explain how and why.

First, on the issue of separate spheres, men and women have opposed positions in the joint creation of urban space, but this does not always map onto public (male) versus

¹⁹ See Žižek, *Sublime* 95-144.

²⁰ See chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of scarcity (a term Jameson borrows from Sartre).

²¹ They mean this in the Lacanian sense that metaphor crosses the “bar” separating signifier from signified and thus marks an experience of limits of a signifying chain. See Lacan 218.

private (female). Rather, this relationship is always changing. In *The American Scene*, James notes that men have recently ceded control of the canvas to their female counterparts:

[T]he field he so abdicates . . . lies there waiting, pleading form [*sic*] all its pores, to be occupied—the lonely waste, the boundless gaping void of “society.” . . . Here it is then that the world he lives in accepts its doom and becomes, by his default, subject and plastic to his mate; his default having made, all around him, the unexampled opportunity of the woman—which she would have been an incredible fool not to pounce upon. It needs little contact with American life to perceive how she *has* pounced, and how, outside business, she has made it over in her own image. She has been, up to now . . . in peerless possession, and is occupied in developing and extending her wonderful conquest, which she appreciates to the last inch of its extent. (254-55)

The masculine urban canvas, like James’s aesthetic counterpart, is filled with “pores” or “voids.” Women, in an act likened to a violent conquest, have taken control of the “void” of society—the home and “all of the social” realm—leaving men only the business world (255).

In what capacity, by what aesthetic means, do women embroider “the boundless gaping void of ‘society’”? Kevin McNamara clarifies that, for James, the female *voice*, in particular, “embellishes the otherwise dull social canvas with richer colorings and more intricate patterns of events that define cultured life” (27). Indeed, in his visits to the U.S. in the 1880s and in 1904/05 James became obsessed with the speech patterns of American women, giving lectures and writing essays on the topic during and after the latter trip.²² Wardley claims that, in these works, James participates in a literary-cultural tradition that aligns women’s voices, especially in domestic conversation, with the (re)production of “democratic culture” (640)—a tradition that includes Emerson, Tocqueville, and Whitman. Insofar as “woman’s speech and her physiology serve as the source of both cultural and biological regeneration in the democracy,” this tradition appears to essentialize the

²² See *Henry James on Culture* (cited parenthetically as *HJC*). “The Question of Our Speech” (42-57) was originally given as a graduation address at Bryn Mawr College in June, 1905; “The Speech of American Women” (58-81) was published in *Harper’s Bazar* in installments between November 1906 and February 1907; and “The Manners of American Women” (82-112) was published in *Harper’s Bazar*, April-July, 1907.

simultaneously biological and cultural role of women (639). James himself called women “the most confidently ‘grown’ and most freely encouraged plant in our democratic garden” (*HJC* 59). As Wardley shows, however, in his speeches to and about women James undermines this organicist position²³ by demonstrating that a woman’s social role, far from being fixed for a particular domestic or reproductive purpose, is as public and as undefined as the urban spaces she populates: “while Whitman’s [women] are the already wifely and motherly ladies of his generation, set self-complacently apart from the whirl of commercial production, James’s [female] audience is . . . more immediately implicated in the social and material conditions that had newly produced the American woman in public life” (642).

In other words, James at least *thought* he was being historical when he named the cultural role women play with their voices in a democracy. I want to suggest that he is participating in what Laclau and Mouffe deem “a sex/gender system,” or “[t]he ensemble of social practices of institutions and discourses which produce woman as a category” (104). As a critic studying James’s writings on gender relations as an example of a fundamental social antagonism, I want to emphasize a crucial point made by Laclau and Mouffe: “It is . . . possible to criticize the idea of an original antagonism between men and women, constitutive of the sexual division, without denying that in the various forms of construction of ‘femininity,’ there is a common element which has strong overdetermining effects in terms of the sexual division” (104). In other words, there is no natural antagonism between men and women but discourses constructing differential male/female relations do influence how the sexual division is lived out and expressed. Unlike Žižek, I will not make the Lacanian case for “sexual difference” as the ultimate Real of self and society.²⁴ Rather, I claim that

²³ As we’ll see, James also mocks this position, which becomes Basil Ransom’s, in *The Bostonians* itself.

²⁴ See Butler et al., 139-151 for Judith Butler’s critique of “the ‘quasi-transcendental’ status that Žižek attributes to sexual difference” (139) Butler takes a historical approach to the Lacanian “lack” or radical negativity, which

James rewrites a hegemonic masculine discourse on the role of women in a democracy to account for the “realities” he discovered in American cities and to aid representation. As Judith Fetterley points out, “American literature is a masculine territory in which the situation of women, if dealt with at all, is dealt with . . . primarily in terms of its effects on men. While no one would want to make a claim for James as an ardent or perhaps any kind of feminist, still he has the ability to place himself on the side of women” (116). Indeed, it should not be forgotten that authors and women play the same meaning-making role.

For this self-styled historian of American manners, however, the female voice is not necessarily an arbiter of democratic culture but can evoke its opposite in Matthew Arnold’s scheme: anarchy. Anarchy holds a central place in the democratic tradition: for Plato, it connoted the overturning of established hierarchies and rules of social decorum in the streets of the city-state.²⁵ In “The Speech of American Women” (1907), James recalls a stroll through Boston from a “quarter of a century” before (i.e., in the 1880s), during which he perceived the democratic anarchy instituted by the female voice in the growing city:

I used to sally forth . . . across the pleasant [Boston] Common and down the spacious slope of Mount Vernon Street. This caused my passage almost invariably to coincide with the hour of “recess” of a seminary for young ladies flourishing hard by; the attendants at which . . . were . . . in possession of the public scene. . . . [T]he vociferous pupils . . . had been turned out [for play] . . . to the pavements of the town, and with this large scale of space about them for intercourse they could scarce do other than hoot and howl. They romped, they conversed, at the top of their lungs, from one side of the ample avenue to the other . . . [and] they . . . indulged in innocent mirth quite as if they had been in a private garden or play-room. (*H/C* 69)

At the time of this stroll (1882), the Back Bay landfill to the southwest of his rented apartment on Mount Vernon Street had been recently completed. Thus, Wardley argues,

is closer to what I want to accomplish here. Žižek’s architectural criticism is more helpful because he names the class struggle as the Real of postmodern buildings and capitalism more generally, which has more of a historical purchase than his writings on the Real of sexual difference.

²⁵ See Rancière, *Dissensus* 49-50.

“[t]he sound of Boston maidens ‘vociferating over the Boston gutters’ suggested to Henry James that modern women had colluded with those modern, material forces to upset Boston’s established configuration” (644). There is some historical precedent for this claim. In a study of gender and power in postbellum Boston, Sarah Deutsch writes: “In a city neither designed for nor controlled by women, women had to reimagine or reconceive the city before they could create female-controlled public and semipublic spaces” (6). To relate this back to James’s metaphor, urban space is not created by women (men “supply” the canvas) but, by 1882, the embroiderers of urban space began to reimagine the old public (male)/private (female) distinction, setting up female-run (counter)publics in the city.

In James’s hands, the example speaks to a larger rule: “in railway-trains and hotels, in shops and in city streets, in all centres of the particular life the most gregarious that the ‘principal countries’ have to exhibit, women contributed a vast and conspicuous contingent” (*HJC* 91). Boston alerted James to a new development within the march of the democratic revolution: first, that women populate and define urban spaces and second, Americans have bad manners in public. At the same time, he finds that there is some base level of civility persisting under the surface, “avert[ing] complete social disintegration” (92). By what “odd law,” James wants to know, do Americans avoid the “easy triumph of chaos” (92)?

In many ways, the idea of an abiding “democratic culture” is meant to contain the threat of dissolution and non-meaning at the core of democracy itself.²⁶ Thus, women themselves, in their role as cultural embroiderers, prevent “social disintegration.” This is not merely a fantasy of what women are capable of so much as, in James’s mind at least, a reality in certain cities on the 1904/05 trip. The difference between 1882 and 1904/05 is between the rule of democratic anarchy and democratic culture. In the early 1880s, James is

²⁶ See Rancière, *Dissensus* 47.

exasperated by the breakdown in the distinction between public and private, male and female spaces, which is yet another failure to map Boston, though it is now clear that the back-and-forth between the male canvas and female embroidery is at the heart of the “large scale of space” (HJC 69). In *The American Scene*, James notes that all apparent signs of warfare between men and women have subsided. This is an act of ideological mystification, however:

The effect of these high signs of assurance in her has been—and it is really her masterstroke—to represent the situation as perfectly normal. Her companion’s attitude . . . does everything it can to further this feat; so that, as disposed together in the American picture, they testify, extraordinarily, to the *successful* rupture of a universal law. (AS 255)

Modern life is a site of rupture in a double sense—it is a historical rupture in gender relations founded upon a fundamental divide between male and female contributions to space—but women, with men following, represent it as a normal “American picture.” The effect is beneficial for James the “restless analyst”: “the equilibrium strikes us, however strangely, as at least provisionally stable; we see that a society in many respects workable would seem to have been arrived at, and that we shall in any case have time to study it” (255). Recall that women and the artist play the same role as cultural embroiders; now, one helps the other. The “provisionally stable” “equilibrium” between men and women—itsself the “masterstroke” of women—allows for the artistic representation of the American city.

As Wardley points out, James’s women perform their new cultural function neither in the home nor in the streets but rather “someplace in between” (640). Her example is the Isabella Stewart Gardner House, a private home-cum-museum on the Back Bay Fens, a later addition to the landfill: “the image of the house as a museum . . . enable[s] traffic between private and public space. The Gardner museum becomes a medium of woman’s appearance in public life, the stage of her occupation as cultural competitor or manager” (658). Though a masculine product, in James’s metaphor, architecture has become both an ally and a stage

for women to craft a cultural equilibrium: certain buildings rearrange the “traffic” between public and private space in a way that can help women appear in public as both “competitors” of men and the “managers” of social life.

Written between the 1882 stroll and the American tour twenty years later, *The Bostonians* depicts a moment when Olive and her fellow Bostonians have entered a changing urban space as political agents but have yet to achieve equilibrium with their male counterparts. Instead, they engage in an all-out war with Ransom, a supporter of an all-masculine canvas. The creation of a purely ideological equilibrium in the “embroidered canvas” of Boston and the political position that will benefit from this “union” are at *stake* in the novel. James, as embroiderer, achieves “a society in many respects workable” for representation by representing the (re)creation and obfuscation of the antagonism between the male canvas and female embroidery through the “zero-institution” (James, *AS* 255).

An aurally pleasing voice—which James implores his listeners to adopt in “The Speech of American Women” after recalling the 1882 stroll—has the ability to represent an equilibrium between men and women, which is similar to the “slightly prosaic equilibrium” between North and South at Memorial Hall (*AS* 48), although for obvious reasons the female voice is better suited to resolve what James views as American society’s fundamental antagonism. In *The Bostonians*, James puts forward both architecture and the female voice (Memorial Hall and Verena) as related but not equally effective bastions of cultural unity in a divided world: the union at Memorial Hall becomes wrapped up in the divide between men and women in the production of urban space, creating the need for a new solution via Verena’s voice, which will parallel the architectural rearrangement of scales in the name of civic or national unity but on a smaller and more fundamental scale of experience.

III. It All Comes Together in Boston

Early in *The Bostonians*, James describes the “latent incompatibilities” between Olive and Ransom (BO 17). These “incompatibilities” first manifest themselves when Olive prepares the dinner table so that Ransom can see the Back Bay “through a window where the curtain remained undrawn by her direction (she called his attention to this—it was for his benefit)” (15-16). Olive frames Boston for her impoverished cousin, shoring up a series of conceptual divides (public/private, insider/outsider, man/woman, North/South, rich/poor). We know this because of Ransom’s belated recognition, via Olive’s sister, of his host’s motivation: “‘That’s what they call in Boston being very ‘thoughtful,’” Mrs. Luna said, ‘giving you the Back Bay . . . to look at and then taking credit for it.’ . . . This, however, was in the future; what Basil Ransom . . . actually perceived was that Miss Chancellor was a signal old maid” (16). By jumping forward and back in time, James encourages us to map what we later find out about these characters’ politics onto this view. In what follows, I will argue that the antagonistic canvas metaphor structures the “latent incompatibilities” between Olive and Ransom as well as their experience of the overlapping scales evoked by the Back Bay view. Gender antagonism is like a black hole at the center of all these relations; only when it is named and then resolved will the novel’s conceptual divides (public/private, etc.) be fixed in a signifying chain denoting a commonsense “way of seeing” Boston. Verena’s voice takes over the ideological function of architecture as the tool James utilizes to make the divided urban canvas signify as a unified space. In other words, she provides the city and the text itself with a “zero-institution” that achieves order against the threat of anarchy. For the same reason, James makes her the object of desire for both Ransom and Olive, since they hope to benefit, personally and politically, from the baseline civic unity Verena achieves.

Olive’s “simple and comprehensive contention” is that “the very essence of the feminine lot [is] a monstrous artificial imposition, crying aloud for redress” (BO 141). The

idea of a “lot” as an “artificial imposition” carries overtones of the “vague marine backwater” imposed upon by the Back Bay landfill (James, *AS* 182): it is as if women are trapped behind and need to break free from the artificial domesticity created by Back Bay brownstones. At another point, when Olive has begun to mentor Verena on the history of women’s oppression, they “turned away [from the window] with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men” (James, *BO* 136). The reason why nightfall is “more cruel than the tyranny of men” is perhaps because it appears natural while subtly allowing masculine tyranny to continue its oppressive creation of an urban canvas in which women are trapped in the private sphere. If this represents, in Deutsch’s words, the “dominant, idealized sexual division of urban space,” then the next step, historically, was for upper-class Bostonians to “entwin[e] the reconstruction of northern domesticity after the Civil War with the postwar reconstruction of the public sphere, demarcating their own zone of public authority while bolstering the . . . sanctity of their own homes” (4, 285).

Olive participates in the historical reconfiguration of public and private space in a way that benefits both her gender and her “home culture”: she visits “squalid lodging-houses . . . [b]ut she reflected that after such exertions she had the refreshment of a pretty house, a drawing-room full of flowers”; furthermore, she attends meetings at a colleague’s South End home, “the common residence of several persons, among whom there prevailed much vagueness of boundary” but, unbeknownst to others, “she mortally disliked it [there] and . . . her most poignant suffering came from the injury of her taste” (James, *BO* 140, 24, 25). She prefigures James’s conclusions about the role of the female voice in promoting culture in a divided world: “The age seemed to her relaxed and demoralised. . . she looked to the influx of the great feminine element to make it feel and speak more sharply” (98).

Ransom, meanwhile, has the exact opposite position: “The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age” (260). “Ransom’s values and character,” according to Joyce Rowe, “evoke a Southern conservative vision of the social order, based upon allegiance to the principle of an organic interconnection among land, family, and community” (177). He believes feminists like Olive have disrupted the natural course of societal growth by entering the public realm. In his view, women should “fertilise” domestic conversation, leaving men to “dare and endure” public space (James, *BO* 304, 260). He thus attempts to “reform the reformers” by sending them back home (17).

“[I]t was [Ransom’s] belief that he saw things in their absolute reality,” and the same can be said of Olive: they both believe that they can map the true socio-spatial coordinates of society, even if they produce what looks, to the other, like an “infatuated, deluded geography” (248, 319). Because the narrator refuses to privilege one perspective over the other,²⁷ the text sways back and forth between these competing representations of reality. Alfred Habegger has even used the phrase “The Disunity of *The Bostonians*” to describe a narrative split between the satire of both Olive’s feminism and Ransom’s organicism. However, this does not mean that cultural relativism is the only narrative technique left. Žižek posits that two divergent maps of the same space are produced by mutually exclusive attempts to symbolize the same social antagonism. Similarly, Olive and Ransom agree that men and women play fundamentally different roles in the creation of urban space, with female voices embroidering a growing masculine canvas (giving it a culture). They are both opposed to the social and political anarchy of urban space as they currently find it and

²⁷ Howe was the first critic to argue that James equally disparages Olive and Basil’s positions.

believe the female voice will be central to restoring order. In other words, they both perceive a force threatening to destroy self and society and believe women are crucial to restoring order; they simply blame the other side (man or woman, organicists or feminists) for unleashing anarchy and preventing cultural unity. What they disagree on is where (the home, the concert hall), how (delightful conversation, political speeches), and to what degree (slight, revolutionary) women should perform their role as cultural embroiderers.

Trying to explain the difference in the way he and Olive understand the role of women in modern society, Ransom tells Verena,

I don't object to the *old* old maids; they were delightful; they . . . didn't wander about the world crying out for a vocation. It is the new old maid that you have invented from whom I pray to be delivered. He didn't say he meant Olive Chancellor, but Verena looked at him as if she suspected him of doing so. (James, *BO* 262)

Here we find our way back to that original window view. Until Mrs. Luna supplies her motives, "what Basil Ransom . . . perceived was that Miss Chancellor was a signal old maid" (16). When Ransom first imagines Olive taking an "*old* old maid's" view of the Bay, the cousins appear to be in harmony regarding the separation between a female-run domestic space and the masculine space "safely framed" by the window (Wardley 649). The window allows for a theoretical connection between interior and exterior, but as a barrier it also prevents their interrelation. Thus, the "*old* old maid" supports an organic vision of society.

However, when Mrs. Luna later unveils Olive's true intentions, the latter becomes a "new old maid" capable of acknowledging the separation between inside and outside before pulling the metropolis inside her home and "giving" it to her guest to demonstrate his outsider status in a Northern city teeming with politically empowered women. Later, Verena explains to Ransom just how politically charged this view is:

last June . . . [t]here were delegates [in town] from every State and every city . . . Olive had six celebrated, high-minded women staying in her house . . . and in the summer evenings we sat in the open windows . . . looking out on the bay . . . and

talked over the doings of the morning, the speeches, the incidents, the fresh contributions to the cause. (184-85)

Olive's "way of seeing" relies on the open window, which is capable of blurring public and private, local and national while still allowing her to retain control of a "home culture" (hosting guests). Thus, the divide between public and private, local and national scales, as well as the sentimental and seedy "ways of seeing" (the suburbs framed like a picture, the suburbs threatening to enter the home) become wrapped up in the political positions of James's characters, which are themselves ways to symbolize the same antagonism.

In summary: Ransom and the *old* old maids imagine an organic connection between the feminine home and the masculine exterior while at the same time erecting a boundary between them to prevent a further slide into cultural anarchy. Inversely, Olive and the new old maids separate private space from an artificially imposed masculine canvas but utilize a breakdown in that barrier to fight for women's rights.

This divide between the masculine canvas and the female embroidery as well as the two interpretations of the role women should play as embroiderers (the *old* old maid-new old maid) also underlie the Memorial Hall sequence. Of course, the scales of analysis are reduced from the urban to the architectural. Verena tells Ransom that his home state (Mississippi) is not "mentioned. But there is a great praise of our young men of war" (BO 188). Yet, because he does not listen to her, Ransom falls for the image of the union in the memorial vestibule. This parallels Olive's initial success at her window: Verena positions Ransom as the defeated Southern outsider. However, as with the Back Bay, James must account for what he sees as the more fundamental divide between different "ways of seeing" emergent scales. At the end of this sequence, Ransom launches a counter-interpretation of the building, excluding women from all memorials: "If, when women have the conduct of affairs, they fight as well as they reason, surely for them too we shall have to set up memorials" (189). "Verena

retorted that they would reason so well they would have no need to fight—they would usher in the reign of peace,” pointing to the sovereign power that must fight for and maintain peace (189). Later, in the Cape Cod section of the novel, Miss Birdseye, a former abolitionist in Olive’s circle, perceives what she believes to be Verena making Ransom a participant in a union benefitting both the North and the feminist cause, as if she had maintained control of the ideology at Memorial Hall and instituted her “reign of peace”: “What Miss Birdseye clung to . . . was the idea that . . . the closest of all unions . . . was preparing itself. Then his being a Southerner gave a point to the whole thing” (309). This union is redolent of the one Ransom redefined at Memorial Hall—it treats geographic difference as an offshoot of gender politics—but this time feminism achieves the upper hand. Thus, between Ransom and Miss Birdseye, Memorial Hall and Cape Cod, union-making architecture becomes routed through a disagreement about the public role of women in urban-industrial society.

James here presents a version of Mouffe’s agonism, where antagonistic “enemies” become adversaries who disagree on just about everything under the sun but at the very least share the terms of their debate. In this case, some form of cultural unity is desirable for both Ransom and Olive, who wield concepts like “equality” and “freedom/liberty” to articulate it. They also recognize a fundamental deadlock between men and women. One of the elements in the debate they agree on, in other words, is the gender antagonism itself.

What this divide lacks is aesthetic mediation, which Memorial Hall originally provided before it was taken up in a new set of divides related to the novel’s feminist politics. In other words, by redefining the ideology of Memorial Hall to account for a more fundamental social divide, James has to give up the “solution” that it provides. This is an important moment, one that makes evident a point that I must insist on to differentiate my reading of the agonism of the realist novel from critics like Kaplan who would read this as a

mere “strategy of containment” (10). The transition from antagonism—the us/them relation that is the background of the realist novel and the urban world it depicts—to agonism—the character debates that make up the foreground—is not itself a formal containment strategy, since the background antagonism motivates and energizes the positions taken in the foreground; but the re-containment of the antagonism can be the *desired result* of the agonistic relation and is hence a function of the characters. *The Bostonians* is one of the most spectacularly agonistic novels in this study because its conflictual foreground is so heavily infused by the mutual recognition of antagonism; and yet the goal of the two parties in the agonism is to achieve the brand of ideological defusing of antagonism that we found at Memorial Hall (the union that “arched over friends as well as enemies”) (189). The goal of agonistic character relations, in other words, is to name the “zero-institution,” that (purely ideological) point of convergence that prevents society from splitting apart at its seams.

Verena’s voice, I will now argue, is capable of providing this kind of ideological solution. The first time he hears Verena speak, “Ransom became aware that the whole audience—Mrs Farrinder, Miss Chancellor, and the tough subject from Mississippi—were under the charm” (48). Men and women, North and South are all drugged, as it were, by her voice. Initially, her father, a mesmerist, has to “draw her out” when she steps in front of an audience and “[s]he let it come out just as it would—she didn’t pretend to have any control” (101, 44-45). Olive eventually replaces her father as the source of inspiration (by paying him off), but the effect of Verena’s voice is the same. When Ransom hears her speak in New York City, “[s]he had . . . reduced the company to unanimity” (206). Verena is thus the characterological equivalent of the “zero-institution”: she is an empty signifier capable of being influenced by various political actors, who motivate the content that she will then deliver to an audience in a seemingly neutral, unifying form. After all, “the only thing in life

she cared for was to put the truth into a form that would render conviction irresistible” (206). Yet, when Verena spurns Olive and chooses Ransom, “the truth . . . change[s] sides,” showing just how fluid this “truth” really is (299). Properly speaking, she transforms partisan political content into an abstract truth that seems to have been delivered “fresh from the hand of Omnipotence” and hence “outside and above all vulgarising influences” (90, 263).

The novel traces Olive’s and Ransom’s attempts to control this “zero-institution” to ensure that their respective agendas benefit from “truths” about unions on a personal, civic, or national level. And these unions, we should add, only *appear* to resolve the antagonism between men and women, male and female spaces. In one of her speeches under Olive’s guidance, Verena clarifies that she will not make a call “to deepen the gulf that already yawns between the sexes, and [that she] doesn’t accept the doctrine that they are natural enemies,” which is the language of antagonism; rather, her “plea is for a union far more intimate—provided it be equal—than any that the sages and philosophers of former times have ever dreamed of” (208). Yet, Olive’s personal “union” with Verena is betrayed by the socioeconomic power that she wields over their friendship, while the non-antagonistic doctrine that she teaches her is undermined by what Verena sees as Olive’s “desir[e] . . . not only [for] justice but vengeance,” or what Ransom calls “a different inequality” (208, 178).

While Olive is initially focused on teaching Verena about feminism rather than just controlling her voice, once she senses that her protégée is being persuaded by her cousin’s overtures, “Olive . . . made her go over every word of her lecture twenty times. There wasn’t an intonation she hadn’t made her practise” (305). Ransom, who never cared for the content of her voice, only appreciates the form it takes: “He took for granted the matter of her speech was ridiculous . . . She was none the less charming for that” (206). He simply tries to convince her to drop Olive’s cause for his own: “Your gift is indestructible; don’t talk as if I

either wanted to wipe it out or should be able to make it a particle less divine. I want to give it another direction . . . It won't gush out at a fixed hour and on a fixed day, but it will irrigate, it will fertilise . . . your conversation" (303-04). Fitting with his organic vision of society, Ransom imagines that domestic conversation will have a social impact: "Think how delightful it will be when your influence becomes really social . . . in conversation" (304). Of course, his version of domestic bliss conforms to the history of matrimony "as a union that claims to abolish dominance only to recuperate dominance in natural terms" (Wardley 646).

Thus, the zero-institution is ideology at its finest: Verena's voice, described as "artless," "pure," "magical," "edifying," "delightful [,] not dogmatic," and "above the brutal uproar of the world" is a mystification resulting from Ransom and Olive's war to tune her voice to a particular ideological station (James, *BO* 42, 75, 122, 47, 177, 50). Her voice achieves (personal, civic, or national) unity while preserving the antagonism between the masculine canvas and feminine embroidery in a form that bolsters a single political position.

In this way, Olive, Ransom, and Verena come to represent the "three main divisions" of Memorial Hall: academic theater, dining hall, and Civil War memorial (188). Olive, whose two brothers died fighting for the Union, is clearly linked to the Northern soldiers in the memorial vestibule. Furthermore, her idea that Verena "should come before the public" after pursuing "high intellectual and moral work" reflects the "theatre, for academic ceremonies" (112, 134, 188). As a veteran who espouses the "ancient prejudices" of "those really medieval universities . . . at Oxford, or Göttingen, or Padua" and who proclaims that Verena's platform will be on "the dining-table," Ransom represents not only the excluded South but the "vast refectory" with windows "like the halls and the colleges of Oxford" (187, 303, 188). Importantly, the memorial vestibule stands *between* the theater and the dining hall. In between these two camps—North and South, academic theater (the

woman as public orator) and refectory (the woman as private orator)—is Verena, whose voice promotes and creates a union that holds a divided audience together. Appropriate for this in-between space, James's readers expect Verena to make a decision between her suitors, giving resolution to a novel split down the middle between Olive and Ransom's views.

A key moment occurs when Olive draws the curtain on her window, creating an intimate space with Verena inside her home before taking her on a U.S. tour:

They watched the stellar points come out at last in a colder heaven, and then, shuddering a little, arm in arm, they turned away, with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men—turned back to drawn curtains and a brighter fire and a glittering tea-tray and more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women . . . (136)

The attempt to change the signification of the space outside Olive's window is placed in abeyance so that Verena's interior can be shaped by Olive. A lot has been made of Olive and Verena's relationship in James criticism, with a focus on the homosexual or homoerotic connotations. How this relationship fits (or, to anticipate, does not) with the undeniably heteronormative metaphor of the gendered canvas is thus worth pausing to explore.

Fetterley famously exposed the political agenda of "phallic" critics like Howe who stressed James's condemnation of Olive's lesbianism "as abnormal, unnatural—in a word, evil" (110). The novel itself, she points out, does not support this reading. There is undeniably satire directed at Olive, though, and the question becomes where it is focused, if not on her "abnormal" sexuality. Peter Coviello has provided a fascinating answer to this query. He claims that James satirizes Olive's feminism as the displaced object of her erotic attachment to Verena. But the *reason* for that displacement is viewed sympathetically: "If the novel . . . heaps opprobrium on [her] feminism, it nevertheless nurtures an open-heartedness and a generosity toward Olive that is rooted in precisely the sense of feminism as a sort of forced and debilitating *misapprehension*, an inadequate substitute in the place of which there

are . . . no immediately better options” (171). The “Boston marriage,” of which the Olive-Verena relationship is a type, existed before the codification of hetero- and homo-sexuality at the turn of the century. We thus find in Olive “the melancholia proper to an object not so much repressed as foreclosed—the blocked mourning, that is, for a loss that was itself never articulable, that could never take shape as a possibility” (179). Olive’s “queer melancholia” (179) takes the place affect served for Howells, as that which can’t be named/narrated: “For all the intensities of being by which Olive wishes to define herself (rage, captivation, delight), there are, it seems, no words” (174). Affect, as Howells learned, also cuts against utopian politics: “Her suffering, James insists both mockingly *and* tenderly, is not the same as that of other women, and has no easy equivalence in the world of reformers. It is, perhaps, a silence not to be ameliorated even by the winning of the ballot” (177). Perhaps, I would want to add, in that world “to come” there will be an opening for an equivalence between feminism and queer politics—while retaining their autonomy—first to name and then mobilize against suffering and oppression along the sex/gender axis even after the ballot has been achieved.²⁸

At any rate, it is nonetheless the case that James satirizes Olive’s feminism. In my reading, this is less because it represents unspoken/unspeakable sexuality displaced onto identity politics but because the radical fight for gender equality belies the degree to which it keeps open an ongoing war between men and women while symbolically resolving their antagonism: her more equal future might just institute a “different inequality” as Ransom fears (James, *BO* 178). But the key to James’s representational project is that he does not simply side with Ransom but rather parodies his utopian “solutions” as well.

²⁸ Coviello takes up this issue later: “A more theoretically-minded reader might . . . appraise Olive as a figure who anticipates the necessarily vexed, ever-unsettled relation of feminism to queer studies: modes of inquiry and critique that can neither function coherently without acknowledgment of one another, nor without distinction between them” (182).

There is a layer to the Memorial Hall scene that mimics Olive's act of closing the curtains: by "keeping the incident of Basil Ransom's visit . . . buried in unspoken, in unspeakable, considerations," Verena transfers the conflict between Olive and Ransom into her mind, which James associates with her body as they sit in Central Park after one of Verena's speaking engagements (224): "Strange I call the nature of her reflections, for they softly battled with each other as she listened [to Ransom], in the warm, still air, touched with the far-away hum of the immense city" (255). The body and the voice reflect the two levels of ideology at work in Memorial Hall: the tablets and Verena's voice represent and create unity while, on a deeper level—in the smallest scale possible, at the core of Verena's being—two opposed political positions continue to do battle.

Once Olive plans a countrywide lecture tour slated to begin at Boston's Music Hall, the shades blocking out the Back Bay are metaphorically pulled up and the city and nation alike are prepared to hear Verena Tarrant. When the newspaperman Matthias Pardon first pitches the Music Hall idea to Olive, he mentions that "he want[s] something on another scale, something so big that people would have to go round if they wanted to get past" (99). James plays on the two kinds of scales at work here—musical/vocal and geographic—in a way that aligns Verena's voice with scale-changing architecture. While Pardon is crafting this plan, "Mrs Tarrant was inquiring of Mr Burrage whether he visited much on the new land," and this is no coincidence: Verena's voice, likened to civic architecture, can evoke and resolve the tensions endemic to the emergent scales of urban-industrial life (99). Thus, we have the imaginary transposition of Memorial Hall (Verena is explicitly aligned with Cambridge and, in my reading, the memorial vestibule) to Boston, where the scalar and personal/political tensions surrounding the filling of the Back Bay can now be resolved.

Initially, the new signification of the city benefits Olive's ideological position. Indeed, the streets are lined with advertisements, "[t]he city of Boston is under [the Music Hall's] roof," and Pardon is ready to report on the event (343). In Chris Walsh's formulation, mass publicity performs a quasi-religious function: it "serves as a . . . unifier of a decidedly non-transcendent, fragmented society" (16). Pardon's piece will create a "union" for a widespread audience after Verena unifies Boston: local and national scales are working as one. When Ransom compares himself to "a young man . . . [who] has made up his mind . . . to discharge a pistol at the king or president," two things are clear: Ransom is a deviant in Olive's space, and, due to the publicity surrounding this event, his attempt to aid Verena's defection will spread far and wide, like the news of Lincoln's assassination (James, *BO* 333).

The largest indication that urban space has been re-signified to benefit Olive's cause is "[t]he figure . . . of a robust policeman" at the door to Verena's waiting room (336). Not only does he prevent Ransom from getting to Verena, he suggests that "the lecture . . . will do [him] good" (337). When the policeman admits that "[t]hey've got the key on that side," James indicates that Olive now polices the fundamental divide between them (literalized as a locked door) (340). However, this control is momentary. Verena opens the door and the policeman "stroll[s] aside a little, with the air of being superseded" (341). Ransom then convinces Verena to run away with him. Without Verena's voice, however, the crowd begins to revolt, turning a union-making event into an antagonistic "battle" (345). At the last moment, Olive "offer[s] herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces" (348). The crowd is "hushed" by Olive's presence, but we never learn what happens next.

James also leaves it open for interpretation what happens to Verena and Ransom after the former's defection from the political stage. On one level, the "tears" that follow "the union" between Verena and Ransom signal that the "inevitable agony" in Verena's

mind is, indeed, inevitable (350, 343). While this gets us to the smallest scale of experience possible—Verena’s mind and body (her suffering)—it is still unclear how this “union” might resolve a fundamental social antagonism. And what about Verena’s voice, which Ransom admits is indestructible? The only answer we have is the one that Ransom gives Verena: her voice will “irrigate” the social world from the domestic realm.

A version of this organic “union” can be found in James’s *A New England Winter* (1884). Written before *The Bostonians*, it takes place after the 1870s setting of the later work, offering a snapshot of Back Bay rowhouses a few years after James’s stroll through Boston:

[T]he large clear windows of their curved fronts faced each other, across the street. . . . A great many ladies were looking out, and groups of children, in the drawing-rooms, were flattening their noses against the transparent plate. . . . This continuity of glass constituted a kind of exposure, within and without, and gave the street the appearance of an enormous corridor, in which the public and the private were familiar and intermingled. (309)

“[P]ublic and private” are “familiar and intermingled” because domestic spaces are projected onto the street; but they are also separated by a plate glass window. Ransom’s organic vision of society has been woven into the built environment. In 1904-05, James will find that the opposite position has achieved cultural hegemony: at that point, women control various public and semi-public spaces while also representing American life in equilibrium. Between his two U.S. visits, then, we can see how the antagonism between the masculine canvas and the feminine embroidery can be resolved with similar tools (architecture and the female voice) but in ways that benefit two opposing positions.

Chapter 3

Unsettling Orthodoxy:

Abraham Cahan's Post-Marxism and the Problem of Jewish Identity

In his 2013 biography of the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century realist author and political activist Abraham Cahan, Seth Lipsky describes the attraction of this biographical subject beyond their shared occupation as editors of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a Yiddish-language socialist newspaper in Cahan's days that became a right-leaning English-language paper under Lipsky's leadership. "Beyond that," Lipsky writes, "I was also attracted by Cahan's political story. He had stood with labor throughout its great awakening and the years during which it was being organized, but he had broken early with the hard-left factions and played a leading role in the long struggle against Communism" (3). This trajectory can be filled in with more details. After being introduced to underground anarchist literature in Russia, Cahan converted to Marxism once he emigrated to the U.S. in 1882. In 1891, he attended the second meeting of the Second International Workingmen's Association as a representative of the United Hebrew Trades. In the early-to-mid-twentieth century he served as editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. By 1951, when he died, Cahan was anti-Communist, pro-Zionist, and believed that change would come about through political reform, not by revolution. Lipsky's narrative of Cahan's life echoes the right-moving trajectory of the so-called New York Jewish intellectuals—Lionel Trilling, Sidney Hook, Norman Podhoretz—from prewar Marxian socialism to Cold War liberalism to 1960s neoconservatism and Zionism.¹

¹ See Schreier 101-106.

Despite the moral and ideological assurance with which Lipsky presents this right-moving trajectory, Tony Michaels reminds us that “Jews . . . did not travel a short, direct road from Yiddish-language socialism to English-language liberalism. An ongoing tug-of-war between radical ideals and practical necessities shaped the Jewish labor movement from the beginning” (20-21).² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have shown, on a more global scale, that the divide between high socialist theory and the daily realities of the labor movement in various countries (e.g. in the U.S., “where ethnic and religious identities predominated over those of class”) yielded a series of responses in the Second International, among which it would be interesting to map the early stages of Cahan’s political transformation (11). As a corrective to Lipsky’s narrative, I will show how Cahan’s Marxism was inflected by liberal-democratic pluralism from the start and how this affected his writing.

Among those who study Cahan, there is a tendency to separate his newspaper editorship, and hence his socialism, from his concerns as a novelist.³ Philip Joseph posits that, while the Jewish Question (that is, the debate surrounding the status of Jews in modern society) produced equivocation if not denial within the ranks of international socialism, English-language fiction gave Cahan *carte blanche* to pose the question in all its complexity. Indeed, an 1890 statement by the Hebrew Federation of Labor read: “The only Jewish question we recognize is the question, how to prevent the development of such ‘Jewish questions’” (qtd. in Joseph 3). In their estimation, Joseph explains, “America offered an end to the Jewish question and an opportunity for a universalist working class movement” (3-4). If, as the editor of the *Forward*, Cahan could not take up the question of Jewish identity in its

² For a critique of Lipsky’s biography on precisely these lines, see Guttenplan.

³ See Sanders 86. This view goes back to those who knew Cahan. For example, Hutchins Hapgood claimed that after Cahan became disillusioned by “socialism in its narrow sense” he “turned, disgusted, to English newspapers and to realistic fiction” (qtd. in Joseph 4).

complexity, then “English fiction offered not only the status of American authorship but an intellectual hiatus from the obligations and narrow conventions of Yiddish journalism . . . Cahan could postpone taking a position on this question because many Americans had not yet defined Jews conclusively either as full citizens or as non-citizens” (5).

Joseph is right to focus on the uncertainty of Jewish identity in America (“whether Jews had the same status as other marginal white populations or whether Jewishness like blackness constituted a racial and cultural exception”) (5). However, he is wrong to suggest that Cahan’s fiction represents a reprieve from his socialist commitments. Cahan, Ronald Sanders explains, “use[d] Howells as [an] example of his thesis that a genuinely realistic perception of the world leads inevitably . . . to an art of social protest—in other words, in Cahan’s view, to an argument in favor of socialism” (239-240). In his 1920 obituary for Howells, the man who had single-handedly jumpstarted his career as a novelist back in 1896, Cahan took issue with the popular characterization of Howells as a socialist: “His socialism was not of the sort which is expressed in the program of the Socialist parties. Howells did not believe in class struggle, but he did believe in the socialist ideal as do the rest of us” (qtd. in Kirk and Kirk 53). Howells appreciated the social and political aims of socialism without adhering to the Marxian narrative explaining how the socialist mode of production will come into existence (class struggle). As we saw in chapter 1, Howells formed an idiosyncratic theory of class antagonism: signs of class difference spoil the joy of “society” for both sides, leading to the geographic segregation that Jacob Riis visualized as the city’s two halves. While Howells hoped “society” would spread from the drawing room to the rest of the city and the world, eradicating antagonism and instituting “real equality,” he oscillated between ideological containment, melancholic despair, and a smiling mode that searched for instances of shared enjoyment in everyday urbanism. Cahan, in his own words, “could not imagine the

achievement of socialism without a bitter struggle” (*Education* 256-257). In aesthetic terms, Cahan realized that without the Marxian narrative of History—the one about capitalism’s constitutive antagonism (the class struggle) and the only path toward “real equality” (revolution)—Howells’s realist program would fail to incite change. If Joseph is correct that Cahan introduced American readers to the Jewish Question, then he did so in the context of placing the class struggle at the center of American realism’s aesthetic and political concerns.

Cahan thus introduced an interested reading public to Jewish experience in urban America by problematizing from the start how Jewish identity would be defined (as a race? ethnicity? religion?); but this was not done out of the “greater scope” for exploring questions of identity offered by the world of letters (Joseph 5). Rather, the Jewish Question became a problem *because* Cahan first insisted on inserting the Marxian problematic into the fabric of American realism, not as a determinate contradiction between characters who represent opposing social classes but, much more interestingly (and less orthodox), as a free-floating master narrative that both explains and stands in tension with the Lower East Side world of his novels. Cahan describes in his autobiography his first days in Lower Manhattan: “I felt America’s freedom every minute. . . . But all the time I was saying to myself, ‘All of this is a capitalist prison’” (*Education* 228). This “confusion in [Cahan’s] brain” (228) manifests in his fiction as a tension between class identity and ethnic identity that eventually spurs a transformation to what I term his post-Marxism, where he fights capitalist unfreedoms as a Jewish-American citizen. At the later stage of his career, the master narrative of the eighteenth-century democratic revolution—which, in Laclau and Mouffe’s estimation, can subsume the Marxian problematic without its class essentialism—provides Cahan with the aesthetic and political means to argue for a cross-class, cross-national Jewish Left.

One might say that the debate between liberalism and Marxism, identity politics and class politics, has been played out. Cahan offers a unique opportunity to historicize an early (pre-Cold War) moment in this debate and measure where a politically active realist writer stands among its key players: Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein in his moment, Laclau and Mouffe, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Fredric Jameson in the aftermath of Cold War side-taking.

In what follows, I first place Cahan's political development within the context of a battle between orthodoxy (Kautsky) and revisionism (Bernstein) in the Second International, as told by Laclau and Mouffe. I will then read two of Cahan's English-language realist works—*Yekl* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917)—as steps in Cahan's transformation from Marxist to post-Marxist. *Yekl* condenses a tension between the orthodox narrative of History—class struggle leading to revolution—and the plurality of subject positions occupied by Cahan's Lower East Side characters. The orthodox position is smuggled into the novella via what Jameson, following Sartre, calls allegorical transcoding: a discussion of boxing in the opening pages tells at least two different stories, on different levels of meaning (roughly, economic and cultural). One story is about the antagonistic relations between capitalists and laborers and between the laborers themselves, and the other is about the viability of assimilation versus cultural separatism. The title character, Yekl (or Jake), likened to a boxer who tries and fails to rise above his class position, unwittingly follows the orthodox stance on assimilation (assimilate now, become class conscious later). This position is met in agonistic fashion by his wife Gitl, who desires a uniquely Jewish identity to emerge from the pluralistic world of urban America. However, it is unclear if or how a newfound Jewish-American subject position can become radicalized in a socialist direction after foregoing class as the true essence of one's (political) identity. By the time Cahan writes *The Rise of David Levinsky*—a clearer variant of the "rise" narrative in *Yekl*—the

question he poses is: how can a Jewish political identity emerge on the Left without a reliance on class essentialism? The answer appears when Cahan has the *Forward* respond, in the pages of his novel, to the title character's economic exploitation by calling for the Jewish Left to join forces in opposition to a Social Darwinian brand of liberalism that countenances inequality while defending free market capitalism.

I. Orthodoxy versus Revisionism: The Global and the Local

In the previous chapter, we saw that James's *The Bostonians* operates on a scale of representation from the voice/body to the nation, with urban architecture mediating between them; Howellsian realism moves within a more restricted spectrum of scales: the body and its entanglement in urban public transportation. Cahan's Lower East Side novels, following his career in the Yiddish-speaking socialist movement, exist at the tense meeting point of the local (the neighborhood) and the international (the socialist international); the particular (ethnic identity) and the universal (the "universal" class, the proletariat).

These competing scales would have been evident to Cahan at the conference of the Second International he attended in Brussels in 1891. The tension between the Marxian narrative of History and the actual spread of capitalism, coinciding with the "growing dissociation between the different subject positions of the workers," produced a "crisis" in Second International Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 13). The solution to this crisis for those who wanted to stay true to Marx and Engels's scientific analysis of society (Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov) was to prepare for a revolution still necessitated by the development of the economic base. This position, known as orthodox Marxism, is a predictive, future-oriented "science" formed from an unstable combination of Hegel, Marx, and Darwin.⁴ The crisis also produced a "revisionist" camp that argued for the "piecemeal realization of socialism by

⁴ See Laclau and Mouffe 14.

normal political means” (Tudor 19).⁵ The two most influential revisionists were Bernstein, with whom Cahan carried on a correspondence, and Jean Jaures, whom Cahan met in Paris in 1912.⁶ Bernstein posited that democracy was not simply the political representative of the bourgeoisie, to be replaced in the revolutionary moment; rather, “democracy is a precondition of socialism to a much greater degree than is often supposed, that is, it is not only the means but also the substance” (Bernstein 160). Because “democracy is merely the political form of liberalism,” socialism is “organised liberalism” (149, 150).

Jack Jacobs has argued that anti-Semitism within the socialist party and a related failure to address the Jewish Question caused Bernstein, an assimilated German Jew, to make the break with orthodoxy.⁷ Whatever the validity of this assessment, Cahan’s own political transformation began the moment he tried and failed to convince fellow members of the Second International to take a stance on the Jewish Question at the Brussels conference. “The Jews,” he argued, “are persecuted, hounded; they have been made into a special class. This class wants to fight and asks for its place in the ranks of Social Democracy” (qtd. in Frankel 132). The proposal led to an official condemnation of both anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism, but Cahan was nonplussed. There was no room, it seemed, for concern about the particular injustices of an ethnic or religious identity within the class universalism that dominated the party’s thinking—such problems, so the thinking went, would wither away with the state and the capitalist injustices it perpetuated.

After he returned home from the conference, Cahan continued to play a central role in the Yiddish-speaking socialist movement on the Lower East Side. This movement was responsible for recruiting hundreds of members to the Socialist Labor Party and, more

⁵ See Laclau and Mouffe 1-36.

⁶ See Lipsky 109.

⁷ See Jacobs 58-59.

impressively, for the unionization of thousands of immigrants who participated in numerous strikes between 1890 and 1914. Historians have demonstrated the importance of this movement, not just to the ranks of international socialism but also to the intellectual, political, and even moral development of New York's Jewish population, which boomed during the great "waves" of immigration following Russia's anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881 (when Cahan came to the U.S.) and 1905.⁸ Tony Michaels describes the difference between the Lower East Side socialist movement and its sister organizations on the continent:

In more culturally homogenous countries, such as England, labor leaders discouraged Jews and other foreign-speaking workers from establishing autonomous, ethnic-based unions and political organizations. Similarly, many Russian socialists insisted in the name of "proletarian internationalism" that all workers, regardless of national background, join a single, Russian-speaking party. The socialist movement in New York, however, presented a different model of internationalism that reflected the population's immigrant character. In a city where most workers were from someplace else, the main socialist political parties and union federations allowed them to form distinct linguistic subunits. Jews could maintain autonomous, Yiddish-speaking organizations yet still participate in larger, multiethnic structures, such as the Socialist Party or New York's Central Labor Union. Jewish socialists were also linked to comrades overseas through the Socialist International. (7)

The allowance of ethnic or national autonomy—a response to the pluralism of this "polyglot" city (7)—within an organization that still saw itself as part of the Second International produced many sparks among Lower East Side socialist intellectuals and, as I will now show, catalyzed Cahan's post-Marxism.

A vignette in Ronald Sanders's *The Downtown Jews* (1969) shows the earliest stages of this transformation. The time is 1902, and Cahan has just been asked to resume editorship of the *Forward* after a five-year hiatus during which he wrote his English-language novella, *Yekl* (1896). A series of ideological and personal squabbles led up to this moment. The

⁸ See Frankel; Herberg; Howe, *World*; T. Michaels; and Sanders. This is not to say that these historians agree on the overall significance of this movement. Howe and Michaels, for example, take issue with Herberg's thesis, which is that the labor movement helped Jews assimilate. Howe also argues that the movement was quite weak at first, at least from an organizational point of view (289).

authoritarian personality and anti-union policies of Daniel De Leon had caused Cahan and others to leave the Socialist Labor Party for Eugene Debs's Socialist Party of America; but then Cahan was quickly ousted from the *Forward*—the Yiddish-language newspaper created in 1897 by the anti-De Leon faction—because he refused to print polemics against their rivals. When he was approached on the streets of New York by his erstwhile colleagues and asked to rejoin the *Forward*, he responded by cataloguing the ways his thinking had changed:

I've been out in the world . . . and I've found out that we socialists don't have a monopoly on honesty and wisdom. The outside world is more tolerant of us than we are of it. It tries, at least, to understand us. You and your comrades are utterly parochial in your outlook. But if the *Forward* remains what it is, it won't get very far. It won't get to a very large audience because it doesn't interest itself in the things that the masses are interested in when they aren't preoccupied with their daily struggle for bread. I'm telling you . . . it's as important, say, to teach the reader to carry a handkerchief in his pocket as it is to teach him to carry a union card. And it's as important to respect the opinions of others as it is to have opinions of one's own. (Cahan qtd. in Sanders 322-323)

"Cahan . . . had just given a spontaneous little sermon on American liberalism," Sanders writes, "but what had been its purpose?" (323).

Motivating this speech is a feeling similar to the one that pushed him to speak up at the Second International conference ten years earlier: his desire for a uniquely Jewish political identity. A common sentiment was that the road to class unity in the U.S. would not be as formidable as the one in Europe because of the absence of ingrained anti-Semitism. Socialist leaders, Cahan included, championed assimilation as a means of readying the Jewish proletariat for the revolution. By 1902, on the brink of his return to the *Forward*, Cahan outlined a new vision for Yiddish-language radicalism consonant with the ideals of liberal pluralism: nobody has a monopoly on the "right" ideas. "For Cahan," Sanders writes, "the purity of socialist orthodoxy was not nearly so important as any method for the betterment of mankind's lot that worked" (317). In other words, Cahan began to think of socialism as being on all fours with other movements for the improvement of mankind. Importantly, he

does not say “Jew” or “Jewish” in the long speech above, and this is the point: a Jewish politics had to be *invented* for it to join those other fights for the betterment of mankind’s lot. As Cahan wrote of the socialist circles in which he first moved, “it never occurred to us that our primary purpose ought to be to organize the Jewish workers so that they might improve their physical and spiritual lot” (*Education* 254). This imagined Jewish politics retains a degree of autonomy within the general improvement of mankind’s lot by focusing on both spiritual and physical needs. Far from arguing for the erasure of Jewish identity with the fall of capitalism, as his orthodox comrades did, Cahan expresses a desire for a Jewish political identity to emerge as an autonomous entity within the socialist movement, which is itself but one of countless ways of improving mankind’s lot in a liberal-democratic milieu.

After accepting the editorship, Cahan and his colleagues at the *Forward* pried open this previously nonexistent space within the socialist party for debates, concerns, questions, and lessons that Yiddish-speaking readers face as they navigate the realities of life on the Lower East Side. As Joseph points out, after Cahan’s return to the *Forward* in 1902, there was a general movement away from “the orthodox Marxist belief in total assimilation” and toward more broadly “Jewish working class interests” (27). Perhaps the most influential move Cahan made as an editor of the *Forward* was to initiate the popular letter-to-the-editor series “A Bintel Brief” (literally: a bundle of letters). Many of the questions and answers in “Bintel Brief” focused on the unique plight of the Jewish immigrant worker and his/her family. One letter begins: “I am eighteen years old and a machinist by trade. During the past year I suffered a great deal, just because I am a Jew” (*Bintel* 63). “In the answer,” the editor writes, “the Jewish machinist is advised to appeal to the United Hebrew Trades and ask them to intercede for him and bring up charges before the Machinists Union about this persecution” (64). In 1891, Cahan was a representative of the United Hebrew Trades (UHT)

at the Second International's second congress when he officially proposed condemning anti-Semitism; twenty years later, the UHT had grown from around 40 members to some 250,000⁹ and, as the editor's answer implies, exerted great influence in the fight against anti-Semitism in the workplace. The editor ends by noting "that people will have to work long and hard before this senseless racial hatred can be completely uprooted" (64).

The same goes for discrimination based on gender. In answer to a letter defending women's suffrage, the editor writes: "Justice can reign among people only when they all have equal rights. If one has more power than the other, it leads to injustice" (95). The editor is not only talking about women but also about the injustice of any situation when one group has "more power than the other." Laclau and Mouffe would call this a relation of subordination, which is only felt as oppression, and hence exposed as a site of antagonism, when compared to the rights inscribed by the eighteenth-century democratic revolution. By deeming relations of subordination oppressive in the light of the liberal-democratic language of "equal rights," the *Forward* joins other movements (socialism, women's rights, civil rights) in the fight for greater equality and justice in the capitalist world system. That the Jewish Left could theoretically focus on many different, highly specific situations and/or identities on the Lower East Side alone implies the scope of the unjust, undemocratic ground uncovered and overturned by this new counter-hegemonic bloc.

If, as I suggested above, Cahan's newspaper work should not be considered in isolation from his realist writing, then we have an opportunity to explore how his first English-language work, *Yekl*, condenses the debate between class identity and ethnic identity that was being sounded in his milieu. While Cahan ultimately pushed the *Forward* in the direction of Jewish cultural autonomy and away from the orthodox polemics of the

⁹ See Frankel 256.

magazine's early years, *Yekl* is much more ambivalent. But it is ambivalent in a way that most critics miss by assuming the Jewishness of Cahan's characters in advance. Rather, I claim, Jewish identity must be forged within the discursive context of socialist orthodoxy.

II. *Yekl* and the Question of Jewish Identity

Yekl revolves around a Lower East Side sweatshop worker named Yekl Podovnik who came to the U.S. from "Povodye—a town in northwest Russia" about "three years before the opening of this story" (Cahan, *Yekl* 10, 9). He leaves behind a wife and child whom he means to send for; however, he perpetually evades this duty in order to preserve the bachelor life he leads in America. His friends and female admirers call him by the Americanized version of his name, "Jake," and are unaware that he has a wife and child back home. In the first pages of the novella, Jake gives a lesson on American boxing to his fellow sweatshop workers while their boss is out searching for business:

"When I was in Boston," [Jake] went on, with a contemptuous mien intended for the American metropolis, "I knew a *feller*, so he was a *pretidy* friend of John Shullivan's. He is a Christian, that feller is, and yet the two of us lived like brothers . . ."

"*Say*, Dzake," the presser broke in, "John Sullivan is *tzampion* no longer, is he?"

"Oh, no! Not always is it holiday!" Jake responded, with what he considered a Yankee jerk of his head. "Why, don't you know? Jimmie Corbett *leaked* him, and Jimmie *leaked* Cholly Meetchel, too. *You can betch you' boots!* Johnnie could not leak Chollie, *becaush* he is a big *bluffer*, Chollie is," he pursued, his clean-shaven florid face beaming with enthusiasm for his subject, and with pride in the diminutive proper nouns he flaunted. "But Jimmie *pundished* him. *Oh, didn't he knock him out off shight!* He came near making a meat ball of him"—with a chuckle. "He *tzettled* him in three *roynds*. I knew a feller who had seen the fight." (2)

It is immediately clear that Cahan's realism will follow the Howellsian practice of rendering speech in dialect. Some critics have noted that Cahan distances himself and his readers from these characters by italicizing "English words incorporated in the Yiddish of

the characters of this narrative” (Cahan’s note attached to the above passage).¹⁰ As with Howells, however, the emphasis on dialect as a formal “strategy of containment” (Kaplan 10) is misleading: dialect shows that the words in an agonistic encounter, which this will prove to be, are not only open to different interpretations but also different *pronunciations*. At this stage, though, Jake’s dialect merely emphasizes what appears to be the larger point of this speech: he fails in his attempt to look and sound as American as possible.

There seems to be no doubt that this passage is about failed assimilation. According to Jules Chametzky, “[Jake] shows off his English and knowledge of American sports to his shopmates, rattling off some names of celebrities: ‘John Shullivan,’ [John Sullivan], ‘Cholly Meetchel [Charlie Mitchell].’ He prides himself on being Americanized; in only three years he seems to have cast off his old identity” (58). Or, in Dalia Kandiyoti’s words, “the first description of Yekl involves the demonstration of his . . . easy adoption of American popular culture. Yekl/Jake puts himself at the center of attention by showing off his knowledge of professional boxing” (76). However, Jake fails to convince his peers of his Americanness, because of his broken English—which, according to Hanna Wirth-Nesher, betrays “his Lithuanian roots”—and his physical “features,” which are “[s]trongly Semitic naturally” (Wirth-Nesher 55, Cahan, *Yekl* 3). Again, Kandiyoti is typical: “Cahan undermines Jake’s efforts by demonstrating that he may perform his way to assimilation all he wants, through boxing moves or dancing, but his racial truth is inexorably stamped on his face” (76).

The problem with such formulations is the underlying assumption of a recognizable Jewish identity undergirding the assimilation narrative. According to Benjamin Schreier, the “assimilation or Americanization narrative has by now become . . . a machine that . . . produces largely predictable results; it is structured to find what it is looking for, namely,

¹⁰ See Barrish, *American* 83.

Jewish identity” (80). Indeed, in the process of faulting Cahan for participating in “racializing discourses,” Kandiyoti herself fixes Jake’s identity by pointing to his race as the crux of the assimilation narrative (76). Schreier later describes this as “the pernicious historicist tendency—itsself bearing a racist heritage” to look back into what has been established by the academy as the canon of Jewish-American literature, with Cahan its “patriarch,” only to find a recognizable Jewish identity playing out a narrative of assimilation (70, 72).

Rather than locating “the Jew” as a historical, national, racial, or biographical category undergirding the assimilation narrative, Schreier wants critics to consider a text’s anxiety about the legibility of Jewish-American identity. He combines the philosophies of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière to claim that Jewish identity is the conflictual but nonetheless *desired* result of a group of people coming together—emerging as if for the first time—to define who “we” are (152-153). Schreier argues that Cahan’s fiction, in particular, reflects a desire for a Jewish-American identity “that does not (yet) exist” (92).¹¹

With Schreier’s polemic in mind, we need to approach the opening sequence afresh. Indeed, Cahan’s narrator notes that Jake’s Jewishness is far from given: “Jake’s very nose, which was fleshy and pear-shaped and decidedly not Jewish (although not decidedly anything else), seemed to join the Mosaic faith . . . as soon as that smile of his made his appearance” (*Yekl* 3). Rather than finding an identifiable Jewish subject, the text evinces an uncertainty about the main character’s Jewishness—he doesn’t look Jewish, but he doesn’t *not* look Jewish—an uncertainty that “seem[s] to” clear itself up when he smiles (3). While describing the contingent factors that work together to make “his features” “more” Semitic than usual, Cahan’s language (“as soon as”) makes it sound like his Jewishness is always “to come.”¹²

¹¹ See Schreier 74, 85.

¹² Indeed, by calling it “the Mosaic faith,” Cahan links Judaism with the idea of the Moses’s covenant with God on Mt. Sinai—an oath promising future action.

When Jake leaves the sweatshop and walks down Suffolk Street, Cahan catalogues the Jewish identity “to come” on the Lower East Side in one of the most breathtaking descriptions of urban life in the American realist canon:

Suffolk Street . . . lies in the heart of that part of the East Side which has within the last two or three decades become the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world. It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth—a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe. Hardly a block but shelters Jews from every nook and corner of Russia, Poland, Galacia, Hungary, Roumania; Lithuanian Jews, Volhynian Jews, south Russian Jews, Bessarabian Jews; Jews crowded out of the “pale of Jewish settlement”; Russified Jews expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kieff, or Saratoff; Jewish runaways from justice; Jewish refugees from crying political and economic injustice; people torn from a hard-gained foothold in life and from deep-rooted attachments by the caprice of intolerance or the wiles of demagoguery—innocent scapegoats of a guilty Government for its outraged populace to misspend its blind fury upon students shut out of the Russian universities, and come to these shores in quest of learning; artisans, merchants, teachers, rabbis, artists, beggars—all come in search of fortune . . . You find there [also] Jews born to plenty, whom the new conditions have delivered up to the clutches of penury; Jews reared in the straits of need, who have risen to prosperity; good people morally degraded in the struggle for success amid an unwonted environment; moral outcasts lifted from the mire, purified, and imbued with self-respect; educated men and women with their intellectual polish tarnished in the inclement weather of adversity; ignorant sons of toil grown enlightened—in fine, people with all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, inclinations, and speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pell-mell into one social cauldron—a human hodgepodge with its component parts all changed but not yet fused into a homogenous whole. (13-14)

Cahan problematizes the assumption, made by the likes of Riis and Howells, that this urban enclave on the Lower East Side is “Jewish” and that this is where its reality lies. Instead, we find an overwhelming plurality of Jewish self-identifications there. For Cahan, the Jewishness of this relatively small section of Manhattan is a representational and political problem that he must tackle when writing about it. This is because the Lower East Side is “not yet fused into a homogenous whole.” Homogeneity does not mean “the same” here but names the result of a future collective identity, when the members of this heterogeneous crowd will fall under a single category, though what that would be remains unclear. Will it be

a class identity (proletariat, bourgeoisie)? A national identity (American, Russian, Lithuanian)? A religious identity (orthodox, secular)? An ethnic identity (Sephardi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews)? Or a hybrid identity (Jewish-American, American-Jewish)?

Schreier posits a disconnect between the spectral figuration of a Jewish identity “to come” in literature and the critic’s project of fixing Jewish identity in terms of a secured, legible past. The problem is that Schreier’s stringent anti-historicism causes him to focus almost exclusively on the text-critic relationship. If Cahan felt anxiety about the legibility of Jewish identity in the present and future, he was responding to the hegemonic discourse about assimilation and Jewish identity available in his own time: orthodox Marxism.

Orthodox Marxism “recognized” Jews as a nation or religious group but urged assimilation into capitalist America to usher in a future without religion, without nations, and thus without Jews. In Irving Howe’s words, “Jewish radicals did not matter enough *insofar as they remained Jews*; they could fulfill themselves as revolutionists only through the self-denial of assimilation” (*World* 289). “True,” Jonathan Frankel adds, “they were at war with the American system of free enterprise. But this was a dialectical hostility, qualified by their belief that socialism would result from the full fruition of capitalism . . . The ‘melting pot,’ for all its hardships and cruelties, was seen as a manifestation of progress, of historical inevitability” (454). The anxiety around Jewish identity is also related to the crisis in Marxism: the future was not coming about as projected and Cahan could either double-down on the inevitability of the revolution or start to think about what Jewish identity might look like without an inevitable awakening of class consciousness and the fall of capitalism.

To approach *Yekl* afresh, we need to unveil the hegemonic discourse—orthodox Marxism—fixing the assimilation narrative within a predetermined, scientifically sanctioned

History (class struggle leading to revolution). Then we can locate an anxiety about (the future of) Jewish identity that emerges in *response to* the predictive failure of this discourse.

To begin with, one needs to be reminded of the setting of Jake's opening speech: an "idle" "cloak shop" on the Lower East Side (Cahan, *Yekl* 1). The momentary pause in manual labor, far from coming as a relief, causes "suspense" in the workers (1). When the boss finally returns with bundles of cloth, the pressers and finishers are "overjoyed by the certainty of employment for at least another day or two" (8). Even though he stands to make more money if the materials are handed out as fast as possible, "[t]he little boss distributed the bundles with dignified deliberation," a "feeling . . . overridden by a kind of malicious pleasure which he took in their eagerness and in the demonstration of his power over the men, some of whom he knew to have enjoyed a more comfortable past than himself" (9).

There is more to this class narrative, though, than the sweatshop setting of the novel. We can find a Marxian conception of class struggle buried in Jake's opening speech, which centers on Irish-American boxer John Sullivan and his recent defeat, in 1892, at the hands of "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, a fellow Irish American. Jesús Constantino claims that, "[t]hrough the familiar cultural idiom of prizefighting, Jake reframes the ethnic balkanization of the tenements into the staged ethnic conflicts of the prize ring" (226). Beginning with a familiar reading—Jake's mastery of boxing demonstrates "his American cultural expertise" (226)—Constantino then makes a much more interesting claim. With his lecture, Jake "attempts to step outside of the perpetual contingency of always waiting for work and to articulate an improvised theory of urban immigrant life, reimagining the violent conflict between labor and capital as a series of ethnic neighborhood rivalries" (228). Boxing is a way to cope with the uncertainty of sweatshop labor and, beyond that, the antagonism between labor and capital in urban-industrial society. It does so by "transforming lived urban

experience into a metaphorical homogeneity” via the abstract space of the ring, with its clearly defined oppositional identities, which becomes a stand-in for the “urban social totality,” itself “an emerging and partial understanding of the spatial logic of urban industrial labor” (242, 243). Later in the opening scene of *Yekel*, Constantino points out, Jake grabs a fellow worker by the collar as the boss walks in—the metaphorized violence of boxing threatens to devolve into the class violence it was meant to make readable in the first place.

Constantino’s focus on the “slippery interplay between boxing-as-metaphor and boxing-as-reality” is a welcome corrective to the assimilationist paradigm discussed above, which reads boxing as a sign of Americanization pure and simple (236). However, he partakes of a key aspect of this paradigm by treating the racial/ethnic identities in the boxing ring and, by extension, the tenement and the city as instantly knowable/known. It is, indeed, as if Jake’s Jewishness is stamped on his face the moment he starts talking about a fight between two Irishmen. The problem, I think, stems from Constantino’s choice of “metaphor” as the literary figure at work in the text’s deployment of boxing, which he also deems “a symbolic figure for the urban industrial ghetto” (237). According to Jameson, the problem with metaphor and symbol, as literary devices that can help map the abstract spaces of capital, is that they lock the terms of comparison into place without the interpretive static one would expect from holding so many levels of reality in mind. Allegory, by contrast, “models a relationship of breaks, gaps, discontinuities, and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds” (Jameson, “Metaphor to Allegory” 25). Jameson’s understanding of allegory is indebted to Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the second volume of which contains a lengthy exposition—some might call it an extended metaphor—

on boxing and/as the class struggle.¹³ While Sartre, like Constantino, traces the “slippery interplay” between bodily violence and the totality of antagonistic class relations (Constantino 236), the Sartrean paradigm allows for discontinuities. For our purposes, such interpretive static is necessary to *trouble* the differences between Jewishness and Irishness and then to start thinking about the tensions between Jewish identity and class identity.

In what follows, I will explicate Sartre’s analysis of boxing with an eye toward the elements that Cahan uncannily prefigures in his representation of Jake’s opening lecture on boxing, which will come to be seen as a class allegory. The discontinuities that emerge in this allegory when one starts to transcode across its various levels have the unintended consequence of forcing Cahan to rethink the question of Jewish identity outside the essentialist strictures of orthodox Marxism. An anxiety about Jewish identity emerges, in other words, when Cahan applies the abstract narrative of the class struggle to the reality of Russian-Jewish assimilation on the Lower East Side.

III. “Commodities of the Fistic Business”: Bernstein vs. Jake

In the uncompleted, posthumously published second volume of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1985), Sartre provides a breathtaking thirty-three-page analysis of boxing, which is meant to crystallize the philosophy of praxis outlined, in a purely abstract and philosophical way, in the first volume of the *Critique* (1960). Sartre’s interpretive problem in the second *Critique* is the intelligibility of History if its “motor” is the class struggle (15). How can the social fabric, torn apart by this fundamental conflict, be considered an object of analysis? (Henry James, we saw in the last chapter, asked his own version of this question.) If

¹³ Laclau and Mouffe claim that metaphor, not allegory, is the linguistic experience of the failure of language, as we saw in the previous chapter. We can reconcile these positions by positing that it is only when metaphor is put into play across a narrative—when it is made into an allegory (an extended metaphor being the basic definition of this term)—that we can confront the *failure* of language in the attempt to narrate antagonism.

History is unified by the class struggle, as Marx tells us it is, this contested unity would have to be intelligible from the punctuated historical event all the way down to an individual's existential experience of the world. In other words, "if we actually establish this abstract principle, the materialist dialectic—as movement of History and historical knowledge—needs only to be proved by the facts it illumines, or, if you prefer, to discover itself as a fact and through other facts" (16). Boxing is such an existential "fact" that illuminates the more abstract philosophical "fact" that "the class struggle . . . [is] the motor of History" (15).

Boxing, for Sartre, incarnates the violence endemic to the society in which it is treated as a spectacle, namely "bourgeois democracies" (34). The violence particular to this society is the class struggle, which results from capitalism's (re-) production of the material fact of scarcity in Nature (where there is not enough to fulfill everyone's needs) by "institutionally exclud[ing] certain social groups from full consumption, reserving it for other groups, insufficient in number to consume everything" (*Critique I* 139). The boxing match is an expression of class struggle (qua antagonism) in a condition of scarcity. Its participants "are of working-class origin," as Sullivan and, to a lesser extent, Corbett were (*Critique II* 35).¹⁴ "These young men, formed by the violence to which they have been subjected, are well fitted to subject others to violence. What they will incarnate in their fights is the same violence that the ruling class exerts against the labouring classes" (36). Sartre's boxer is a loner who "sells" his anger to a middle-class promoter as a way of rising above, and even punishing, his class of origin. In other words, he has "invent[ed] the idea of having himself treated as a commodity, in order to transcend the status of his class all of whose members are commodities" (37). "The outstanding success of a few champions," however, "should not hide from us the fact that . . . the great majority of boxers are in a situation hardly

¹⁴ See Isenberg 75.

superior to that of workers and often more precarious” (41). Sartre thus posits an imperfect but interesting correlation between the rise of sport as entertainment and the development of the industrial revolution: the bodies of boxers and laborers incarnate the movement of History by selling their labor-power and their wellbeing for the material profit of managers and the delight of consumers. This necessitates that there is not only an antagonism between labor and capital, but between the sellers of labor themselves. The difference between boxers and laborers, on this front, is just as telling: “with workers, years of trade-union experience and social conflict have at least ended by reducing these antagonisms and developing a class solidarity. The boxer, by contrast, a lone exploited individual who from childhood has been unable to solidarize with workers, experiences all the harshness of competition” (44).

Cahan seems to be uniquely aware of the comparison between boxing and the selling of labor-power: the boxer’s movements, as demonstrated by Jake—“‘right-handers,’ ‘left-handers,’ ‘sending to sleep,’ ‘first blood’”—are “commodities of the fistic business,” much as Jake’s “brawny arms and magnificent form” and “robust legs” are made into salable commodities in the sweatshop market (Cahan, *Yekl* 2,11). Just as a future boxer is picked out of the urban crowd by a recruiter or manager, “his legs had been thought by his early American advisers eminently fitted for the treadle” (11). Jake’s body is thus linked directly to the sewing machines, his “weapo[n] in the battle of life” (11). Meanwhile, Jake’s “little boss,” like the boxing promoter or the audience, perversely enjoys the workers’ reaction to scarcity. Aping a social system that distributes scarce resources unequally, the boss pits the pressers against one another by ensuring that his “favorites”—Jake and “De Viskes”—receive their materials first, harvesting feelings of jealousy, envy, anticipation, and anger that might have turned against the boss but are instead rerouted into an individual desire for advancement

out of scarcity: “The others went to their machines empty-handed and remained seated, their hungry glances riveted to the booty until they, too, were provided” (9).

There is also Jake’s audience to consider. Despite his best attempts, “his brawny arms and magnificent form did not charm” the women of the shop “as much as he thought they did. For a display of manly force, when connected—even though in a purely imaginary way—with acts of violence, has little attraction for a ‘daughter of the Ghetto.’ Much more interest did those arms and form command on their own merits” (3). Much like the boxer, Jake’s unique physical features and his invocation of justifiable class violence are stolen, as it were, and turned into a new kind of product (a commodity).¹⁵ Suddenly, Jake’s arms are not violent but “pleasant.” In other words, Jake’s female co-workers appreciate his brawny arms not for the violence they incarnate but for the aesthetic pleasure they evoke.

Boxing for both Sartre and Cahan could be mistaken for a static metaphor or symbol, where, in Jameson’s words, there is “a kind of identity between the historical processes and the existential individual” (“Foreword” xx). Jameson, though, argues “that a rather different use of Sartre’s idea may be available if we substitute the logic of allegory for that of the symbol” (xx). To use the language of *The Political Unconscious*, Sartre’s analysis of boxing is a form of allegorical transcoding—“the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or ‘texts’ or two very different structural levels of reality”—with the Marxian master code underwriting and justifying the movement across social levels (40).¹⁶

Similarly, in *Yek!* Jake incarnates the boxing match and the metaphysical ground of that match—the class struggle in a condition of scarcity: “He stood in the middle of the

¹⁵ See Sartre, *Critique* II 43.

¹⁶ See Jameson, *Political* 10, 47, 88-102. History, for Jameson, is akin to Sartre’s scarcity in that it remains “the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit” of writing and interpreting alike (100).

overcrowded stuffy room with his long but well-shaped legs wide apart, his bulky round head aslant, and one of his bared mighty arms akimbo” (Cahan, *Yekl* 2). As he shadow-boxes for his co-workers, he incarnates the truth of their menial existence as laborers selling their labor in the overcrowded, stuffy region that is New York’s Lower East Side. Put differently: Jake may be *like* the boxer (by turning his body into a commodity), but this metaphor becomes allegorized when Cahan asks us to keep multiple levels of social life in our heads: the “overcrowded stuffy room” (2) is at once a sweatshop, a boxing ring, the Lower East Side, and, at the final level of analysis, un-representable in itself, the realm of scarcity.

The language of boxing in *Yekl* is then transcoded into a heated debate on assimilation.¹⁷ Jake’s opponent is a “rabbinical-looking man” named Bernstein, who interjects with a jab at Jake’s Americanisms: “America is an educated country, so they won’t even break bones without grammar. They tear each other’s sides according to ‘right and left, you know.’ This was a thrust at Jake’s right-handers and left-handers” (4). An argument begins about the role of boxing in American society—which, Bernstein argues, condones violence so long as it is organized—that is itself a boxing match on a different level (the verbal “thrust”). Bernstein’s main point of attack takes the form of an imaginary fight pitting a Russian peasant’s unmediated violence against the American boxer’s highly mediated violence: “a burly Russian peasant would, without a bit of grammar, crunch the bones of Corbett himself; and he would not *charge* him a cent for it either” (4). An uneducated Russian peasant would defeat “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, so known because he argued for rigid boxing rules and adopted middle-class sensibilities. Since Bernstein, not the peasant, is in the

¹⁷ A Talmudic debate in Cahan’s short story, “The Imported Bridegroom” (collected with *Yekl* in the Dover edition) is also treated metaphorically as a boxing match, though differences are noted: “To her [Flora], it was something like a boxing-match, with every exciting element of the sport, but without any of its violence (which alone kept Flora from attending pugilistic performances), though the arms and fingers of our venerable combatants were even more active than the arms and fists of two athletes in a modern ring” (Cahan, *Yekl* 130).

“ring” with Jake, not Corbett, it becomes clear that the debate is also about the different levels of assimilation evinced by these two characters: Jake and his supporters (“the two girls and the presser”) “espous[e] the American cause, while Malke the widow and ‘De Viskes’ sid[e] with Bernstein” in defending the Russian peasant and hence the homeland (4).

With Schreier in mind, we should not assume the Jewishness of these characters in advance: so far, the debate about assimilation centers on an immigrant’s fidelity to either the country of origin or the new country. Jake introduces the question of Jewish identity into the debate only when pressed in a corner by “the widow,” who claims that he will give up his love of sport “when he has a wife and children to *support*” (5). Jake does indeed have a wife and child back home. Bernstein unwittingly forces him to recall this connection to Russia when he says, of the ostensibly figurative wife and child, “I do not see how you manage to live without them” (5). Jake responds “on the defensive”: “Once I live in America . . . I want to know that I live in America . . . Here a Jew is as good as a Gentile. How, then, would you have it? The way it is in Russia, where a Jew is afraid to stand within four ells of a Christian?” (5). For Jake, being in America means letting go of the past and standing on equal footing with “Gentiles.” Back in Boston, he had such a feeling: “I knew a *feller*, so he was *preticly* friend of John Shullivan’s. He is a Christian, that feller is, and yet the two of us lived like brothers” (2); “in New York,” however, “the Jews are a *lot* of *greenhornsh* and can not speak a word of English” (5). Jewishness strikes him as the very thing that, in New York, prevents him from feeling like he “lives” in America, a feeling once secured by his indoctrination into the cult of American sport in Boston. “As a consequence, since Jake’s advent to New York his passion for American sport had considerably cooled off” (24). He longs to regain that feeling of living in America, achieved when his Jewishness ceases to be a factor.

Jake questions Bernstein's view of the Jew in America: "How then would you have it?" (5). Bernstein's non-answer evinces his own anxiety about the future legibility of Jewish identity in America, but for different reasons than we saw with Jake. While Bernstein allows for the difference between Jew and Gentile, he obsessively reads "an English newspaper" to learn the language of his new country, suggesting some concessions to the assimilationist viewpoint (4, 1). Inversely, Jake wants to erase the distinction between Jew and Gentile, but his language, manners, and appearance are interpreted as "Semitic" by his peers (3).

The difference between Jake and Bernstein, on this point, is hinted at by the reference to a fight between first-generation Irish immigrants Sullivan and Corbett. These two fighters did not express Irishness in the same way: Sullivan wore his Bostonian Irishness on his sleeve, making it part of his personal mythos, while Corbett was "a bit outside the stereotypical mold of the Irish-American prizefighter," embodying assimilationist aims like middle-class decorum and the importance of education (Isenberg 303). "*I'll betch you* you don't know that Corbett *findished college*," Jake tells Bernstein after the latter implores him to follow educated fighters (Cahan, *Yekl* 5). In his autobiography, Corbett touches on this point of difference between himself and the man he defeated in 1892:

My unpopularity with the Irish struck me as rather peculiar, for everybody that ever belonged to me, as far back as we could trace, was Irish through and through, and Sullivan, like myself, was born in this country, of Irish parents. Of course this attitude was due to Sullivan's disposition, which was just the right mixture of good nature, aggressiveness and temper for a fighter, so people thought; while I was always more controlled and a little too businesslike, perhaps, to vie with him in popularity. (171-172)

If Sullivan and Corbett's Irishness were rewritten as the difference between Jake and Bernstein's Jewishness, it would not be a perfect match: ever popular with the "daughters of the Ghetto," Jake wants to assimilate to the American way of life without formal education while Bernstein, whose "reserved manner, if not his superior education, held [his] shopmates

at a respectful distance from him,” asserts the importance of a uniquely Jewish identity in American society (Cahan, *Yekl* 48).

The question of Jewish identity in America—what it will look like, now and in the future; its comparison to other nationalities and cultural/religious identities—irrupts into the act of transcoding between manual labor and assimilation debates with the shared language of boxing, shoring up the difference between these two “texts,” one of which is about class identity while the other stands in the more properly superstructural realm of ethnic or national identity. Jameson assures us that gaps and discontinuities are to be expected in any act of transcoding. The question to tackle, now, is whether the Marxian master narrative can account for the so-called “Jewish Question,” i.e. the problem of Jewish identity.

In “On the Jewish Question” (1843), Marx gave an allegorical account of the Jew’s place in his conception of History. The Jew is a symptom of the pluralism and individualism of civil society in a liberal-democratic state, where the right of free religious expression has become the right of private property and its protection, not just from the state but from other people: “The Jew, who occupies a distinctive place in civil society, only manifests in a distinctive way the Judaism of civil society” (50). Since civil society has become the secular sphere of capitalistic egoism, it must be eliminated along with its superstructural expression in/as the “Jew”: “As soon as society succeeds in abolishing the *empirical* essence of Judaism—huckstering and its conditions—the Jew becomes *impossible*” (52).

Needless to say, Cahan did not accept this diagnosis—which in its broad strokes influenced the orthodox stance on assimilation—especially once the future that Marx envisioned appeared out of step with actual conditions. Another vignette, this one is more properly termed an allegory, from Sanders’s *The Downtown Jews* explains what Cahan sees happening to the Marxian master narrative when it confronts the Jewish Question:

Cahan summed up his own position in a story which echoed both with the traits of Talmudic *Haggadah* [storytelling for spiritual instruction] and with his recently acquired passion for bird watching. Once upon a time, the story went, there was a city that had no birds in it who could sing. The inhabitants longed to hear the singing of birds. Then one day a Jew came into the city and proposed a remedy: he knew a certain way of chanting the Holy Name of the Lord (a traditional method for healing and working miracles in Jewish folklore) which would bring forth melodies from birds that had never sung before. He proceeded to try out his method on the birds of the city; but every time he approached one of them to make his incantation, it would fly away. Unable to get close enough to any of the birds to work his miracle, he became heavy-hearted with despair. Then one day another Jew came to the city and said to him: "Scatter some corn! If the birds have something to peck at, they won't fly away so quickly. And while they're pecking, you can make your incantation." (Sanders 340-341)

The allegory works on many levels, across many discourses, and not just the named ones (the Haggadah and bird watching). It can be rewritten to fit debates about realism. In Cahan's obituary for Howells, we recall, he claimed that the Dean did not have a proper notion of class struggle to go along with his socialism. Howells, like the first man in the story, tries to convince his readers of the values of socialism without understanding or communicating with those who would most benefit from a world without classes. Cahan, meanwhile, wants to teach his readers about the class struggle, but knows that they need to be distracted, engaged in something else, before they will listen. Thus, his early English-language realism is not *about* the class struggle but it gestures allegorically toward it: Jake is expressing a desire to assimilate to American culture when he talks about boxing, but Cahan is also telling his readers about the degraded position of the worker in an exploitative system.

In this sense, the allegory is best unraveled by the Marxian master narrative, which is its hidden "key."¹⁸ From this point of view, the problem is clear: these urban birds live in a condition of scarcity, which is not only physical (hunger) but also political—they are isolated,

¹⁸ Sanders calls it a "the fable of the birds" but this is slightly misplaced. According to Jameson, a fable is binary in nature ("picture and caption, narrative and moral") while the allegory has both of these aspects along with the intervention of "the allegorical code or system," which "can be embedded in the text somehow, or can be found to float outside it in the form of cultural knowledge" ("Metaphor and Allegory" 25).

without the ability to participate in a common language. They are alienated from what Marx calls “*species-being*” (46), which is here represented by birds that can communicate with one another. While “the inhabitants longed to hear the singing of birds,” this promise of working class solidarity—the other side of the dialectical coin from pluralistic fragmentation—appears to be permanently stalled. Class solidarity is not coming to fruition because certain segments of the urban proletariat are not fulfilling their “natural” role (which is to sing).

The two men represent the two responses to this crisis in international socialism: orthodoxy and revisionism.¹⁹ The first man suggests chanting the name of God, which, as the “remedy” for these ills, is the promise of socialism. This solution speaks to the role of propaganda in orthodox circles, which was one of the only political options they recognized that would ready workers for a revolution a little farther off than Marx expected. While theoreticians purported to speak to and for workers, the latter did not always respond with open arms (the birds fly away). Those who did were isolated from those who refused the call to organize along class lines.²⁰ The second man suggests feeding the birds and chanting while they eat, speaking to revisionism’s emphasis on immediate concerns and piecemeal reforms.

It is here, on this level of party debates, that the Jewishness of the birds/masses and, more clearly, the two men, come into play. The crisis in the Marxian conception of History is brought to bear on debates about assimilation: what “kind” of Jew is the party willing to recognize as an agent for social change? The orthodox perspective, as we have seen, was that Jews “could fulfill themselves as revolutionists only through the self-denial of assimilation” (Howe, *World* 289). A nationalist arm of the socialist party, which gained strength around the turn of the century, argued for the acceptance of Jewish identity as a means for encouraging

¹⁹As Laclau and Mouffe have shown, when the working class did not coalesce as planned, and in fact appeared helplessly fragmented, the socialist party took on a bigger and bigger role in making sure this happened (46-47).

²⁰ See Laclau and Mouffe 16.

collective action.²¹ The first man in the allegory is orthodox insofar as he “recognizes” the birds only in terms of the song he wants them to sing (he wants class solidarity). The second man tries to improve “the physical and spiritual lot” of these *Jewish* workers, with the hope that they will then learn the first man’s incantation (Cahan, *Education* 254). The corn is clearly enough bits of Jewish culture that Cahan believes the *Forward* should draw upon to meet the Jewish worker half way. Importantly, the second man shares the same goal as the first (getting the birds to learn the incantation), and thus does not abandon hope that class unity can be achieved by the socialist party (the birds will sing if you approach them correctly).

As Eduard Bernstein envisions this revised master narrative, the transition to socialism will be accomplished by the protection of civil society, not its elimination (along with the Jew):

Social Democracy does not want to break up civil society and make all its members proletarians together; rather, it ceaselessly labours to raise the worker from the social position of a proletarian to that of a citizen and thus to make citizenship universal. It does not want to replace civil society with a proletarian society but a capitalist order of society with a socialist one. (146)

For Marx, civil society divides man in his “*species-being*” from the “*abstract citizen*” and must be eliminated for the ideal of universal citizenship to become real (46). In contrast, Bernstein (like Mouffe, as we will see below) reconceives the radical possibilities of democratic citizenship within the ineradicable pluralism of civil society. For Kautsky, Sartre, and Jameson, who wish to remain true to Marx’s original thought, this is nothing but a panicked response to certain mutations in the economic base that occurred after Marx’s lifetime but that are wholly explainable in his purely economic analysis of capitalism.²² Even Laclau and

²¹ See Frankel 453-454.

²² Kautsky argues that Bernstein is simply responding to a brief period of economic prosperity in the West (26-27). Similarly, Jameson accounts for Bernstein’s revisionism in terms of the production of new technologies in the imperialist stage of history (*Valences* 377-378). Sartre claims, in terms that clearly influenced Jameson, that the Marxian analysis of History is *the* philosophy of our times, the “limit and horizon” of all thought and thus

Mouffe note that Bernstein's revisionism is beset by a troubling ambiguity: "if the working class appears increasingly divided in the economic sphere, and if its unity is autonomously constructed at the political level, in what sense is this political unity a *class* unity?" (26).

To put it in Cahan's terms: what will happen when the Jewish masses, won over by the second man's recognition of their unique cultural/spiritual needs, sing the first man's song? In 1902, when Cahan re-joined the *Forward*, there was a sense that an autonomous Jewish politics needed to emerge from the ranks of Second International Marxism. This led him to accept a revised Marxian master narrative that recognized the unique physical and spiritual needs of the Jewish worker in the here-and-now, but there was no substitute for class when it came time to imagine what this new identity would look like in the future.

Yekl is notable for acknowledging the pressure put on the orthodox master narrative by the desire for a Jewish identity. A question about the viability of a Jewish identity emerging from the class essentialism of Second International Marxism (orthodoxy and revisionism alike) makes itself felt when the text pits two kinds of assimilation narratives against each other: Jake, whose Jewish identity is a lingering problem that he would just as soon slough off (a position amenable with the orthodox stance on assimilation); and Bernstein, who wants to assert the difference between Jew and Gentile while accepting certain practical adaptations to life in America (a new position that combines revisionism's pragmatism and nationalism's emphasis on an autonomous Jewish identity). This is only an

"'revisionism' . . . is either a truism or an absurdity. There is no need to readapt a living philosophy to the course of the world; it adapts itself by means of thousands of new efforts, thousands of particular pursuits, for the philosophy is one with the movement of society . . . [T]he 'philosophical crisis' is the particular expression of a social crisis, and its immobility is conditioned by the contradictions which split the society. A so-called 'revision,' performed by 'experts,' would be, therefore, only an idealist mystification without real significance. It is the very movement of History, the struggle of men on all planes and on all levels of human activity, which will set free captive thought and permit it to attain its full development" (*Search* 7).

undercard match, though, which ends when Jake attacks Bernstein's "leading foible [,] his well-controlled vanity" by mocking the latter's inability to learn English (Cahan, *Yekl* 48).

The main event begins when Jake attempts to become as American as possible but is thwarted (in his mind at least) by his wife and child. His wife Gitl represents the possibility of creating a Jewish-American identity from the intersection of numerous lines of self-identification, putting pressure on the Marxian conception of class as the determinant identity. In the last chapter of *Yekl*, however, Cahan folds this identity back into the dialectic of History, with its promise of future class solidarity emerging from the current state of fragmentation, exposing the limits of his post-Marxism at this point in his career.

IV. The Main Event: Jake vs. Gitl

Jake is the undisputed main character of *Yekl* for the first three chapters: we watch him pass some down time at work, toil at his labor, and then dance and flirt with abandon at Joe's Dance Academy. It is only in the third chapter when the reader realizes that Jake has a wife and child back in Russia, to whom he has finally sent money for passage to America. In the fourth chapter, Jake meets his family "at the Immigration Bureau of Ellis Island," which opened its doors after an 1891 act transferred "the inspection of immigrants from the states to the federal government" (Cahan, *Yekl* 33; Howe, *World* 54). When they meet for the first time in years, Jake, dressed in the latest American fashion, is embarrassed by his wife: "She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue," as she is unaware "of the fact that in New York even a Jewess of her station and orthodox breeding is accustomed to blink at the wickedness of displaying her natural hair" (*Yekl* 34). "She was naturally dark of complexion," we learn, "and the nine or ten days spent at sea had covered her face with a deep bronze, which combined with her prominent cheek bones, inky little eyes, and, above all, the smooth

black wig, to lend her resemblance to a squaw” (34). Jake pleads with his wife to take off the wig, and she compromises by replacing it with a scarf, which “made her look like an Italian woman of Mulberry Street on Sunday” (37). In Henry Wonham’s words, Gitl’s “racially marked eyes, cheeks, skin, and hair . . . embody a complex blending of ethnic cues (is she of Native-American, Hebrew, or perhaps Asian origin?), to the point that her caricatured image operates for [Jake] as a symbol of race itself, rather than any one race in particular” (127).

The overdetermination of Gitl’s identity, as I will call it, immediately poses political questions about her purported Jewishness: to what degree is Jewishness like other racial, ethnic, national, or cultural minority identities that are deliberately or unconsciously devalued by representatives of the federal government (the inspection agents)²³ and the American people at large? Mary Esteve argues that Cahan’s representations of the immigrant crowd in *Yekl* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* support the nativist belief that “race or ethnicity per se had become a public-political matter. In other words, a newcomer’s political status as an immigrant and his or her personal status as belonging to an ethnic group were rendered inseparable” (Esteve 174). Esteve wants to break the link between the personal and the political; but there *is* no sure link between Gitl’s “political status as an immigrant” and the ethnic group to which she belongs, as she seems to belong to many groups at once, none of which accords with the racial/ethnic identity one is tempted to project onto her.

Whenever Gitl measures herself up against her husband, though, one identity comes to surpass all others: her class. One of the first things she says to Jake is that he “look[s] like a *poritz*,” which the author’s note tells us is “Yiddish for nobleman” (Cahan, *Yekl* 35). After Gitl makes several “compromise[s] between her conscience and her husband,” she allows Jake and a neighbor, Mrs. Kavarsky, to buy her a fancy hat and a corset. After trying them

²³ See Howe, *World* 46.

on in secret, Gitl looks in the mirror and thinks, “quite a *panenke* [noblewoman]!” (40). If the goal is, in Mrs. Kavarsky’s words, to “make a Fifth Avenue lady of” Gitl, then it becomes clear that Jake hopes to rid his wife of her “greenhorn” ideas, clothes, and behavior by instilling in her a desire to rise above their current class position (39). Mrs. Kavarsky assures Jake that Gitl will “give in” to the temptation represented by the clothes, and she appears to be right: “[Gitl] turned to the right, then to the left, to view herself in profile, as she had seen Mrs. Kavarsky do, and drew a step back to ascertain the effect of the corset . . . She viewed herself again and again, and was in a flutter both of ecstasy and alarm” (40). This performance, like the boxer’s before a crowd, shows the degree to which the body must become a commodity to even countenance rising above one’s condition.

Orthodox Marxism’s class essentialism functions much like the corset: it attempts to fix the identity of a newly arrived immigrant like Gitl in terms of class and, to this end, suggests a full assimilation to the new country, since the revolution can only come about from fully-developed capitalism. Cahan hints at a future call to arms when a knock at Gitl’s apartment door causes her to throw off the ill-fitting corset in shame: “Trembling all over, she scampered on tiptoe back into the bedroom, and after a little she returned to her calico dress and bandana kerchief. The knock at the door had apparently been produced by some peddler or beggar, for it was not repeated” (40). When the knock of revolution arrives, she must be ready to discard her assimilationist garb and accept her new class identity. In the meantime, however, the “corset proved utterly impotent against the baggy shapelessness of the Povodye [her hometown] garment” underneath, suggesting that this entire course of action—assimilate and wait—does not work for her (40). The indeterminacy (shapelessness) of her racial/ethnic/national identity appears to free Gitl from a present or future determination by class. With class unable to “fix” her political identity, the question of her

Jewishness is posed anew: to what degree is Jewishness like the other racial, ethnic, or national identities to which she is compared?

Gitl wants to create a new Jewish-American identity that embraces, rather than constrains, the plurality of self-identifications open to her:

At one moment she took a firm resolve to pluck up courage and cast away the kerchief and the wig; but at the next she reflected that God would be sure to punish her for the terrible sin, so that instead of winning Jake's love the change would increase his hatred for her. It flashed upon her mind to call upon some "good Jew" to pray for the return of his favor, or to seek some old Polish beggar woman who could prescribe a love potion. But then, alas! who knows whether there are in this terrible America any good Jews or beggar women with love potions at all! (42)

"[T]he old Polish beggar woman" and the "good Jew," who is Orthodox like Gitl, might help her acclimate to new conditions while retaining crucial elements of her past. The Lower East Side's versions of the "old Polish beggar woman" and the "good Jew" who can help Gitl construct a Jewish-American identity are Mrs. Kavarsky and Bernstein.

Eventually, Mrs. Kavarsky gives up on making a "Fifth-Avenue lady" of Gitl and instead focuses on removing her wig, a holdover from Orthodox practices in Russia: "I am as pious as you . . . and come from no mean family, either . . . yet I am not afraid to go with my own hair. May no greater sins be committed!" (57). Gitl and Mrs. Kavarsky drop the business of the corset on the sudden appearance, in Jake and Gitl's apartment, of "a veritable *penenke*," Jake's love interest Mamie Fein: "She was apparently dressed for some occasion of state, for she was powdered and straight-laced and resplendent in a waist of blazing red, gaudily trimmed, and with puff sleeves, each wider than the vast expanse of white straw, surmounted with a whole forest of ostrich feathers, which adorned her head" (49). When Gitl rushes over to Mrs. Kavarsky's for advice, the neighbor berates her:

"[Y]ou are a lump of horse and a greenhorn and nothing else!" (Gitl felt much relieved.) "That piece of ugliness should *try* and come to *my* house! Then she would know the price of a pound of evil. . . . America is not Russia, thanked be the Lord of the world. Here one must only know how to handle a husband. Here a husband

must remember '*ladas foist*'—but then you do not even know what that means! . . . It means that when a husband does not *behave* as he should, one does not stroke his cheeks for it. . . . If the wife is no greenhorn she gets him shoved into the oven, over there, across the river [the prison]." (56)²⁴

Removing the wig will allow Gitl to shake the last vestige of patriarchal culture and embrace the legal options a wronged wife has over her husband in New York.

Turning to the law is a last resort, though: Mrs. Kavarsky's immediate advice is to placate Jake by removing her wig and seeing if this can save the marriage. Despite her final plea for marital compromise, Mrs. Kavarsky's original plan—where the wronged wife asserts her legal rights over the misbehaving husband—comes closest to the route Gitl takes. Gitl allows Mrs. Kavarsky to cut her hair, but when Jake reacts unfavorably and winds up proposing a divorce, Gitl strikes: "May you and your Polish harlot be jumping out of your skins and chafing with wounds as long as you will have to wait for a divorce!" . . . Her unprecedented show of pugnacity took him aback" (71). The return of boxing language is unsurprising: Gitl has made her first step toward assimilation (removing her wig, cutting her hair) and openly challenges her husband's attempt to rise above his condition with Mamie Fein, who has a healthy savings account. In this way, Jake and Gitl's divorce represents a new entry in the pugilistic debates about Americanization begun by Jake and Bernstein.

Debra Ann MacComb places *Yekl* within the tradition of "divorce fiction," explaining that divorce is a form of Americanization insofar as "participation in that institution figured the promise of American democracy": "ironically, it was (and is) divorce rather than marriage that became internationally identified as a particularly American institution, in part because of the perception that it was a 'citizen's right in a democratic

²⁴ Mrs. Kavarsky is implying that Jake could skip town: "In America one must take care not to displease a husband. Here one is today in New York and tomorrow in Chicago; do you understand?" (57). Desertion was a serious issue for residents of the Lower East Side and often led to prosecution. See Howe, *World* 179-180.

country dedicated to the principles of freedom and happiness” (152).²⁵ After only “three years” of residency in the U.S., however, Jake would not yet be eligible for citizenship status (the minimum was five years) and thus neither would his wife (Cahan, *Yek!* 12). We can salvage MacComb’s point by turning to Mouffe’s re-conception of democratic citizenship as an allegiance to the ethico-political values of democracy (liberty and equality), which has the benefit of moving political identity away from exclusionary state-level procedures and toward the ineradicable pluralism of civil society.²⁶ This sets the stage for an agonistic battle between those with competing definitions of a citizen’s rights, which is what we see in the different styles of Americanization that emerge in Gitl and Jake’s divorce.

For Mouffe, even an agonistic or conflictual “consensus” on the ethico-political terms of democracy presupposes the existence of a fundamental antagonism that can never be resolved. Laclau and Mouffe define antagonism as “the presence of the ‘Other’ [that] prevents me from being totally myself . . . Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence: its objective being is a symbol of non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as full positivity” (111). Sartre’s framework is also built on the fact of antagonism between self and Other. “In the framework of scarcity, constitutive relations are fundamentally antagonistic” (*Critique II* 15). “[This] means that the *mere existence* of everyone is defined by scarcity as the constant danger of non-existence *both for another and for everyone*” (*Critique I* 130). Theoretically, there could be another world outside of scarcity, and thus the utopian impulse survives in Sartre’s work, even if “we are completely incapable of *simply imagining* such a relation” (123). Mouffe claims that antagonistic relations can never

²⁵ Maccomb quotes from Glenda Riley’s *Divorce: An American Tradition* (Oxford UP, 1991), p. 34.

²⁶ See Mouffe, “Democratic Politics.”

be eradicated but they *can* be channeled into agonistic debate if the terms are agreed upon. Even in *Yekl*, Cahan starts to trend toward this post-Marxist position, *avant la lettre*.

We can sketch out Jake and Gitl's clashing viewpoints like we did for Olive and Ransom in *The Bostonians*. While Jake desires a figurative divorce from Jewishness with his literal divorce, making him as free and equal as any consumer, Gitl hopes to match an allegiance to democratic ideals—the ones allowing her to be “divorced by the Government of the land”—with her ongoing, if transformed, allegiance to Orthodox Judaism, which is on display during the “rabbinical divorce” that she must “accept . . . with the same free will and readiness with which [she] hast married [her] husband” (Cahan, *Yekl* 85). Jewishness is not, as in the assimilationist narrative promoted by Jake and orthodox Marxism, relegated to the past and American-ness to the future; rather, in keeping with revisionism's political fight for universal citizenship and the freedoms it entails, the Russian-Jewish past is brought into the present and made equivalent to the democratic “free will” implied in the right to divorce.

When Gitl and Jake receive the rabbinical divorce, both are joined by supporters:

The low-ceiled room was fairly crowded with men and women. Besides the principal actors in the scene, the rabbi, the scribe, and the witnesses, and, as a matter of course, Mrs. Kavarsky, there was the rabbi's wife, their two children, and an envoy from Mamie, charged to look after the fortitude of Jake's nerve. Gitl, extremely careworn and haggard, was “in her own hair,” thatched with a broad-brimmed winter hat of a brown colour, and in a jacket of black beaver. The rustic, “greenhornlike” expression was completely gone from her face and manner, and, although she now looked bewildered and as if terror-stricken, there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence with which a few months' life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of every immigrant. Jake, flushed and plainly nervous and fidgety, made repeated attempts to conceal his state of mind now by screwing up a grim face, now by giving his enormous head a haughty posture, now by talking aloud to his escort. (83)

The setting should remind us of the “overcrowded stuffy room” in which the novella began (2). Indeed, the image of boxing returns: the “two principal actors” face off in front of a crowd of strangers, backed by their respective entourages. Again, varying levels of

assimilation square off. Gitl has shed her “greenhorn” look and appears in complete control; making subtle compromises between her Orthodox practices and the realities of life in America, Gitl asserts her rights as a Jewish-American woman wronged by her husband. Jake, meanwhile, overcompensates for his insecurity with a hyper-masculine performance, redolent of his workplace demonstration in the opening pages.

Cahan alludes to the fate of his characters in a final chapter entitled “A Defeated Victor.” Jake heads straight to City Hall to marry Mamie, while Gitl plans to marry Bernstein after a mandated period of “nine-one days” passes (86). Jake, who first sought the divorce and is outwardly overjoyed by the result, winds up losing in the long run: “instead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi’s house the victim of an ignominious defeat” (89). Meanwhile, Gitl heads home weeping, “followed . . . by a batch of neighbors,” for whose benefit she undertakes a “demonstration of grief”; inwardly, though, she is overjoyed at the new life that awaits her with Bernstein: “Already on her way from the rabbi’s house, while her soul was full of Jake and the Polish girl, there had fluttered through her imagination a picture of the grocery business which she and Bernstein were to start with the money paid to her by Jake” (88-89). One would be hard pressed to find a more Sartrean way to frame Jake and Gitl’s divorce: the winner loses and the loser wins, which is the dialectical logic by which the Marxian narrative of History envisages the fall of bourgeois capitalism.

Applied to Jake, what Jameson calls the Sartrean “‘winner loses’ logic” makes sense (*Postmodernism* 5). He attempts to rise above his current socioeconomic status by marrying Mamie. Like the boxer, however, victory is stolen from him—here in the form of divorce fees, state and rabbinical, to go along with a healthy alimony. On “a Third Avenue cable car . . . bound for the mayor’s office” where he and Mamie will get married, Jake is forced to confront the inevitable unhappiness that lies ahead: “Each time the car came to a halt he

wished the pause could be prolonged indefinitely; and when it resumed its progress, the violent lurch it gave was accompanied by a corresponding sensation in his heart” (89). From the start, Jake’s character—his desire to Americanize by rising above his current condition as well as his past—has been perfectly amenable not only to the boxer’s life but also to orthodox Marxism’s vision of capitalism’s inevitable, pre-determined march towards ruin.

Gitl, the “loser” in the divorce, wins in the end. Gitl has represented the overdetermination of identity, as opposed to final determination by class or race/ethnicity, and the possibility of joining a new hybrid Jewish-American community that makes room for, instead of closing off, the plurality of possible self-identifications on the Lower East Side. As Mrs. Kavarsky explains, by divorcing Jake and choosing to marry Bernstein, Gitl seems to have achieved this dream: “you are going to marry a young man of silk who is fit to be a rabbi, and is as *smart* and *ejecate* as a lawyer . . . You ought to say Psalms for your coming to America. It is only there that it is possible for a blacksmith’s wife to marry a learned man, who is a blessing both for God and people” (88). This is a class narrative that will later be called the “American Dream.” Once they are married and receive the alimony, Gitl and Bernstein will become petty bourgeois grocery store owners.

In the orthodox Marxist master narrative, the petty bourgeoisie was given the task of reforming bourgeois political democracy up to the point where the proletariat seizes control.²⁷ Thus, Gitl’s status as a loser who wins is related not only to an economic rise from non-working poor to the petty bourgeoisie but also to the progressive changes that can be made within the context of liberal democracy by the latter class. This narrative, though, is

²⁷ “The class nature of every demand or task,” as Laclau and Mouffe write of the limits of the concept of hegemony in Marxian discourse, “has to be fixed a priori. There are bourgeois-democratic demands, petty-bourgeois demands, etc., and their relative progressiveness is established through a political calculation which analyses every conjuncture in terms of the traditional model of stages” (49).

subjected to a reversal: the proletariat, the historical loser, emerges as the hegemonic class in the last instance and abolishes bourgeois democracy altogether. Given the ongoing crisis in Marxism, one wonders if Cahan, like Eduard Bernstein, sensed that this final dialectical reversal would never come about and that whatever progressive political reforms the petty bourgeoisie (or the working class, for that matter) are able to institute in the near future would be part of the ongoing work of protecting the rights of all working people in a liberal democracy. In this scenario, (future) political unity is a function of class. We need only recall the allegory of the birds to understand the logic Cahan becomes mired in here: he has made room for the existence of a Jewish-American identity amongst Lower East Side workers, one that accounts for both economic concerns and religious beliefs/practices, sartorial issues, marital problems, and the like; but the *political* destiny of this new identity is tied to a larger fight for workers' rights (they must learn to sing the same song as the other birds). While Cahan puts subtle pressure on the class essentialism of orthodox Marxism, he cannot yet imagine the terms by which Gitl and Bernstein will become politicized enough to fight the injustices of capitalism as and for Jewish Americans or American Jews.

By the time Cahan wrote *The Rise of David Levinsky*—first serialized as the “Autobiography of an American Jew” in 1913 and published as a long novel in 1917—his outlook was different. Particularly after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, where close to 150 workers died after being trapped in a burning factory, Cahan began to sense that the fight against the injustices of capitalism would be most effective in the push for an eight-hour workday, safer working conditions, and other reformist positions. The enemy, Cahan realized, was not so much the means of production—which will be seized by the proletariat in the final instance—but rather a political belief supporting gains for the few at the expense of the many. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan calls for an alliance of Left-leaning Jews to

oppose a Social Darwinian offshoot of classical liberalism supporting a free market economy, rampant individualism, and a non-interventionist state.

V. Social Darwinism vs. Marxian Socialism

Despite surface-level similarities, Cahan has almost nothing in common with his most famous literary creation, David Levinsky. Born in northwest Russia, Levinsky is orphaned at a young age, becomes fervently Orthodox, and is sent to America by the daughter of a wealthy assimilated Jew who agrees to care for him as an act of charity. In America, Levinsky begins his slow but steady rise from personal tutor to sweatshop worker (these experiences he shared with Cahan) to owner of his own small garment shop to tycoon in the clothing industry. The first sentences of the novel prepare us for this journey: “I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America—in 1885—with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States” (Cahan, *Rise* 3). Life at the top is “devoid of significance,” though, owing to his inability to find love (3). Levinsky’s unhappiness is intricately related to the secular ideology that comes to replace Orthodox Judaism as his central belief system: Social Darwinism. If he does not marry, he will pass down neither his successful traits nor his wealth to the next generation.

Importantly, it is socialism that draws Levinsky’s ire and leads him to see himself as one of the elect in Herbert Spencer’s concept of the “survival of the fittest”:

In my virulent criticism of the leaders of the union I had often characterized them as so many good-for-nothings, jealous of those who had succeeded in business by their superior brains, industry, and efficiency. One day I found a long editorial in my newspaper, an answer to a letter from a socialist. The editorial derived its inspiration from the theory of the Struggle for Existence and the Survival of the Fittest. Unlike many of the other editorials I had read, it breathed conviction. It was obviously a work of love. When the central idea of the argument came home to me I was in a turmoil of surprise and elation. “Why, that’s just what I have been saying all these days!” I exclaimed in my heart. “The able fellows succeed, and the misfits fail. Then the misfits begrudge those who accomplish things.” I almost felt as though Darwin

and Spencer had plagiarized a discovery of mine . . . Later, however, when I dipped into [Spencer's] *Social Statics*, I was overborne by the wondrous novelty of the thing and by a sense of my own futility, ignorance, and cheapness. I felt at the gates of a great world of knowledge whose existence I had not even suspected. I had to read the *Origin of Species* and the *Descent of Man*, and then Spencer again. I sat up nights reading these books. Apart from the purely intellectual intoxication they gave me, they flattered my vanity as one of the "fittest." It was as though all the wonders of learning, acumen, ingenuity, and assiduity displayed in these works had been intended, among other purposes, to establish my title as one of the victors of Existence. (282-283)

Cahan might as well be the socialist to whom the editorial responds and thus against whom Levinsky formulates his new self-identity as "one of the victors of Existence." Given that Cahan "studied [Spencer] in order to rebut Spencerian arguments against socialism" (Pittenger 106), I will argue that the novel itself offers an extended journey into the heart of Levinsky's Social Darwinism to better rebut it. Charles Chesnutt uses a similar technique in *The Marrow of Tradition*, which he calls "mining" the opposition, to fight against a Social Darwinian brand of white supremacy.²⁸ In Cahan's case, a similar process defamiliarizes his own Marxism; thus, the novel's rebuttal of its main character's Social Darwinism proceeds from Cahan's awareness of the similarities between these hegemonic discourses. This awareness, however, also leads to the formal expression of Cahan's post-Marxism.

In the long passage above, Spencer and Darwin are discourses in which David Levinsky recognizes himself not just as "one of the victors of Existence" but also as the original author of this idea (Cahan, *Rise* 283). Given the importance of discourse to Levinsky's new self-identification, it will be productive to consider this moment alongside Laclau and Mouffe's rewriting of Althusser's ideological interpellation. There is clearly *misrecognition* when Levinsky finds *himself* in Social Darwinian ideology but it does not occur along the real/illusory axis. Rather, in his rush to identify with Social Darwinism, Levinsky

²⁸ See chapter 5.

forgets about how precarious such a (political) self-identification is in the first place. Indeed, earlier in the novel, when he is a lowly sweatshop worker, he admits: “Had I then chanced to hear a Socialist speech I might have become an ardent follower of Karl Marx and my life might have been directed along other lines than those which brought me to financial power” (153). What separates the Marxian master narrative from its Social Darwinian counterpart is not scientific truth-value but access to the discourse at a certain point in life. Cahan had a similar intellectual awakening when he remembered Marx, whose works he read in secret in Russia, as he worked in an American factory: “These things I had previously read in books on political economy, and now I would say to myself, ‘Here am I, a dead tool like the rest.’ It fascinated me that the facts were just as the books said they were” (*Education* 231). Social Darwinism and Marxian socialism are related by what they do for those who discover them: they give an otherwise plural, contingent social identity a place in a larger master narrative that, after the moment of discursive *misrecognition*, is felt to be the correct one all along.

The novel itself—Levinsky’s account of his life, written when he is an adult—is an act of rewriting the past, present, and future to fit a master narrative that he discovered, by chance, in early adulthood. For example, Levinsky’s rise can be explained by his inborn “ability ‘to stand punishment,’ as the pugilists would put it” (Cahan, *Rise* 22). As with Sartre but for different reasons, boxing is the cultural expression of the violence endemic to a realm of scarcity. The quality helping Levinsky survive in this milieu is his ability to take punishment. A similar idea operates within Howells’s “economy of pain,” where the urban underclass is felt to have a higher tolerance for pain. For the Darwinist, however, every environment is different and requires new methods of adaptation. While he can go many days without eating in Russia, Levinsky has to find a new way to withstand hunger in the U.S.: “Sometimes . . . I would burn my hand with a match or bite it as hard as I could. Any

kind of suffering or excitement was welcome, provided it made me forget my hunger” (141). His adaptability later allows Levinsky to rise. One day, Levinsky spills milk in his sweatshop and takes his licking from his boss: “My head was swimming. I was about to say something insulting to my employer, to get up and leave the place demonstratively. But I said to myself that I should soon be through with this kind of life for good, and I held myself in leash” (188). Levinsky takes his verbal punishment while plotting future revenge: he convinces the factory’s best worker to join forces with him in his own clothing business (188).

The socioeconomic rise of David Levinsky only yields unhappiness, much like Silas Lapham’s in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, to which Cahan’s title clearly alludes:

“Sometimes when I am alone in my beautiful apartments, brooding over these things and nursing my loneliness, I say to myself: ‘There are cases when success is a tragedy’” (529).

One is tempted to rewrite Levinsky’s tragedy in “winner loses” logic, as Cahan does for Jake and Gitl at the end of *Yekl*. But this would ignore the degree to which the Social Darwinian master narrative can account for Levinsky’s unhappy rise in its own terms.

In the Social Darwinian master narrative Levinsky by which abides, the inborn trait that has enabled him to adapt so successfully to life in urban America—the ability to withstand pain—threatens to become extinct if he cannot pass it along to his offspring. Levinsky also feels a sense of alienation from his past: “My past and present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over the Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer” (530). The price to pay for accepting biological traits as the backbone of his social and economic success is that he becomes alienated from what he calls “inner identity,” which signifies his feeling of Jewishness. A page earlier, though, Levinsky conceives of his identity in terms of “race” when explaining his inability to settle down with

his last viable mate, who happens to be a Gentile: “I often speculated and theorized on the question of proposing to her. I saw clearly that it would be a mistake. It was not the faith of my fathers that was in the way. It was that medieval prejudice against our people which makes so many marriages between Jew and Gentile a failure” (527). “It’s really a pity that there is the chasm of race between us,” he later tells her. “Otherwise I don’t see why we couldn’t be happy together” (528). Schreier finds in this use of “race” a disentanglement of Jewishness from identity-markers founded in the past (“faith of my fathers”) or in biology (the “chasm of race”), replaced by a desire for an alternative future where these essentialist categories no longer signify (74). The “chasm of race,” however, is called upon *by Levinsky* to explain why marriage between Jew and Gentile would be a “failure.” His assumption that the “chasm of race” will doom the marriage aligns him with the nativist sentiments that achieved hegemony in the first quarter of the twentieth century, leading to legislation requiring literacy tests for immigrants (1917) and setting quotas on certain nationalities (1924).²⁹ Levinsky has become trapped in a master narrative that he initially uses to explain his worldly success. Now, at the end of his life, it marks him as Other and alienates him from his Jewishness.

At the end of *Yekl*, Cahan resorts to a “winner loses” logic that this pins Gitl’s newly won Jewish-American identity to a master narrative that predicted the future eradication of cultural/religious signifiers like “Jew” or “Jewish.” If a similar move is lurking in Levinsky calling upon the “chasm of race” to explain away his last real shot at love, Cahan has placed his main character in murkier waters. As Mike Hawkins shows, eugenicists drew on Social Darwinism to “produc[e] a graphic picture in which racial survival in a world of incessant conflict was predicated upon the maintenance of a healthy population purged of those elements which threatened its integrity” (247). The somber mood at the end of *The Rise of*

²⁹ See Howe, *World* 53-57.

David Levinsky can be attributed to Levinsky's recognition that his defense of the "chasm of race" feeds a white supremacist fantasy of racial purity, since he is unlikely to reproduce.

One also wonders if Cahan senses an uncomfortable family resemblance between the Social Darwinian prediction that (white) "race consciousness"³⁰ will emerge from "the survival of the fittest" and the Marxian prediction that (proletarian) class consciousness will emerge from the class struggle. In a later passage, Cahan confronts the similarities between these two otherwise contrasting "sciences": "For all my theorizing about the 'survival of the fittest' and the 'dying off of the weaklings,' I could not help feeling that, in an abstract way, the socialists were not altogether wrong" (*Rise* 519). The point where Levinsky feels socialists are not "altogether wrong" may be the shared belief that modern industrial society is but the midpoint of a larger evolutionary narrative. For both discourses, industrial capitalism and its pet political system, representative democracy, replaced an earlier way of life—feudalism for socialists, the militant age for Social Darwinists—and will, in turn, be superseded by the final stage in social evolution, the socialist mode of production or Spencer's equilibration.³¹

The more "abstract" agreement between Social Darwinism and orthodox Marxism is that they offer a scientific account of social and political change modeled on Darwinian evolution, with the added spin that the future of the species could be predicted. Both discourses share the problems that occur when one turns Darwinian evolution into a *predictive* science. Laclau and Mouffe argue that the threat of authoritarianism is built into the solution that orthodoxy proposed for the "crisis" in Marxism, which gave the party the ability to intervene on behalf of the masses if they were not fulfilling their class role.³² The

³⁰ The term is Lothrop Stoddard's, from his book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920).

³¹ For an account of Spencer's vision of evolution and its influence on American thought, see Hofstadter 37.

³² See Laclau and Mouffe 46-47.

threat of authoritarianism is even more evident in eugenics.³³ Related to the authoritarian temptations built into these two master narratives is an issue that hit closer to home for Cahan. Both Social Darwinism and Marxian socialism fail to provide a place for the Jew in the projected futures that their theoreticians might have to make a reality for everyone else. These systems “recognize” Jews in terms of an essentializing identity (race or class) only to imagine a future in which this identification will be superseded or eliminated.

In the sentence after Levinsky admits that socialists may not be “altogether wrong,” Cahan re-poses the question of Jewish (political) identity on another level—the ground-level, as opposed to “abstract” conceptions of social evolution—and appears to gain a better foothold to make his own rebuttal to Social Darwinism: “The case was different, however, when I considered [socialism] in connection with the concrete struggle of trade-unionism (which among the Jewish immigrants was practically but another name for socialism) against low wages or high rent” (*Rise* 519). Jewish immigrants live out their role in the class struggle not by attending party meetings or reading Marx before bed, but by joining a union and striking for higher wages. Such is the reformist position. Importantly, Levinsky believes that his own position has also undergone a reform: “Not that I had remained inflexible in my views regarding the distribution of wealth in the world. Some of the best-known people in the country were openly taking the ground that the poor man was not getting a ‘square deal’” (518). He also claims to recognize the unique needs of Jewish workers by allowing them to work on Sunday instead of the Sabbath, which not coincidentally means juking the union.

Clearly enough, the *difference* between socialism and Social Darwinism is best articulated, not on the level of high scientific theory, but in the day-to-day relations between

³³ Lothrop Stoddard, one of the U.S.’s main defenders of eugenics, “met German eugenicists . . . and Nazi politicians . . . and continued to enthuse over Nazi eugenic and racial measures into the 1940s” (Hawkins 246).

union members and their employers on the Lower East Side, with a special focus on questions about Jewish identity. At the same time, this more productive articulation of the agonism between Social Darwinism and socialism relies on another abstract point of agreement, but one very different from the authoritarian temptation discussed above. The agonism between Marxian socialism and Social Darwinism necessitates that both positions give up the pretension of predicting or influencing the course of social progress; instead they must burrow into the present moment of urban-industrial life, where the future is not given but is rather the contingent result of current political beliefs and actions. Importantly, both positions agree on the world we have now: liberal democracy shaped to fit the exigencies of urban-industrial capitalism. In fact, the opposition between socialism and Social Darwinism, when confronting the political system of the here-and-now, stems from a general agreement that the “natural,” God-given rights of liberal democracy—liberty and equality—are, in fact, man-made and thus open to new interpretations. “An adversary,” Chantal Mouffe writes, “is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. But we disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles” (*Democratic* 102). This is how the adversarial relation between Levinsky and socialism plays out in *The Rise of David Levinsky*: as the common ground changes from the authoritarian temptations of scientific theory to the ethico-political principles of democracy, the difference between the two positions is re-staged as opposing conceptions of the same two terms, liberty and equality, and their application to the Jewish population on the Lower East Side. While this removes the scientific truth-value from both positions, it does not completely relativize them since Cahan imagines that one better serves this population. But to make his rebuttal, Cahan first articulates the Social Darwinian definitions of liberty and equality.

Spencer was an ally of anarchism because his emphasis on individual liberty implied that the coercive state should be abolished.³⁴ Another interpretation of his doctrine takes the opposite path to the state-sponsored weeding out of undesirables. A Social Darwinism that begins with the ethico-political values of democracy skates a position between these two extremes. Hawkins calls this political position “Individualism,” the practitioners of which (Spencer included) “fought to reassert what they saw as the essence of liberalism—negative freedom and *laissez-faire*”; it is thus a forerunner of what we now call neoliberalism (89).³⁵ Equality “was incompatible with liberty, and any interference in society and economy through political engineering was doomed to be counter-productive” (112). While this represents the orthodox Social Darwinian view, many of its practitioners countenanced equality on the state level while maintaining that it does not exist in civil society, except in the equal freedom to which one is entitled. William Graham Sumner, the most influential American Social Darwinist and someone far more pessimistic about democracy than Spencer, once said: “The State gives equal rights and equal chances just because it does not mean to give anything else” (qtd. in Hawkins 113). Still, Sumner was of the belief that political democracy would pass away in the next stage of sociopolitical evolution, so this concession to equality is not overly meaningful. But when historical events appeared to be going in a direction opposite of what he had envisioned, Sumner came to the defense of democracy (he predicted a regression to the militant stage of society if the U.S. became an imperialist superpower, defending state-level democracy as a protection against atavism).³⁶

³⁴ See Cahan, *Education* 333. See also chapter 4.

³⁵ Hawkins 98 for a comparison between Social Darwinian individualism and what we now call neoliberalism.

³⁶ Hofstadter points out that “[t]hose who were familiar with Sumner’s crisp iconoclasm on the subject of democracy may have rubbed their eyes to see [him] attack imperialists for preparing the abandonment of the nation’s democratic principles” in essays like “The Conquest of the United States by Spain” (1898) (195).

Levinsky proves himself to be a thoroughgoing individualist who, like Sumner, defends a modicum of democratic equality. His individualism is evident the moment he discovers Darwin and envisions *himself* the rightful author of such ideas. Later in the text, after he has cemented himself as a major player in the clothing industry, he feels that even those who compliment him on his success do not “appreciate the subtlety of [his] thoughts and feelings” (Cahan, *Rise* 347). The seeds of his unhappiness are sown here—he is such an exceptional individual that he is alienated from everyone else, destined to be alone.

In this bleak outlook on the individualist’s future Cahan shares something with Jack London, whose main character in *Martin Eden* (1909) is also a self-made man (an author, no less) for whom Spencer offers “the master-key of life” (379). Martin is one of only a “half dozen individualists in Oakland” but, needless to say, they do not get together socially (384). London said of his creation: “Being unaware of the needs of others, of the whole human collective need, Martin Eden lived only for himself, fought only for himself, and, if you please, died for himself” (qtd. in Sinclair 9). Without dying, Levinsky suffers from the same ironic “confirmation” of his specialness, which Cahan, like London, pits against the collective possibilities of Marxian socialism. There are also key differences between Levinsky and Eden. When faced with a Republican political candidate who professes belief in the survival of the fittest yet campaigns “on interstate commerce regulation, on regulation of the railway trust and Standard Oil, [and] on the conservation of the forests,” Eden denounces this man’s “mongrel democracy [as] nothing else than pseudo-socialism” (London 383). A strong democratic state, like socialism, goes against natural selection. A reader of Nietzsche, Eden instead argues that “[t]he world belongs to the true noblemen, to the great blond beasts, to the non-compromisers, to the ‘yes-sayers.’ And they will eat you up, you socialists who are afraid of socialism and who think yourselves individualists” (384).

Cahan has his main character avoid a similar prognostication by accepting, later in his life, that democratic equality can be a subdued but nonetheless viable partner of a Social Darwinian commitment to individual liberty: “if my Antomir employees were willing to accept from me lower pay than they might have received in other places, their average earnings were actually higher than they would have been elsewhere. I gave them steady work. Besides, they felt perfectly at home in my shop. I treated them well. I was very democratic” (Cahan, *Rise* 379). These “democratic” relations are tied to that part of Levinsky that still feels close to his life in Russia: “It was enough for a cloak-maker to ask me for a job with the Antomir accent to be favorably recommended to one of my foremen” (378). This “special consideration” (378) counteracts natural selection. Yet Levinsky admits that “democratic” employee-employer relations are part of a selfish desire to make as much money as possible, confirming that the unforgiving capitalist in him survives his more “flexible” Social Darwinism: “All this, I confess, was not without advantage to my business interests, for it afforded me a low average of wages and safeguarded my shop against labor troubles” (378).

Cahan would reject this defense of individual gains at the expense of the workers he deigns to protect from the unions. Yet, in the novel there is an undeniable authorial understanding and even tenderness surrounding Levinsky’s rise. Perhaps this is because Levinsky makes room for Jewish self-identification outside the strictures of biological race: his Antomir society links Jewishness to region, religion, and work. Furthermore, he connects this identity to the promises of democracy. Near the end of the text, a musician plays the “Star Spangled Banner” for diners at a fancy Catskill Mountain resort and the audience, Levinsky included, is deeply moved. He acknowledges that capitalistic motives play into their patriotism but posits that there may be another sentiment motivating this response:

Men and women were offering thanksgiving to the flag under which they were eating this good dinner, wearing these expensive clothes. There was the jingle of newly-

acquired dollars in our applause. But there was something else in it as well. Many of those who were now paying tribute to the Stars and Stripes were listening to the tune with grave, solemn mien. It was as if they were saying: "We are not persecuted under this flag. At least we have found a home." (424)

The audience's patriotic thanksgiving to their new "home" is related to the money they have made in the U.S.; but their more "solemn mien" is related to a respect for the equality before the law and the freedom to practice any religion promised by the democratic state. They will not be "persecuted" for being Jewish as they were in Russia during the pogroms.

Levinsky is still committed to individualism but he now acknowledges that the democratic state, on both the political and social level, best enables such a conception of individualism, not to speak of Jewish identity, to flourish. His ideal state is limited in scope and power—it grants your rights; what you do with those rights (make money or languish in poverty) owes everything to your unique skillset. The class interests of such a position are openly acknowledged and celebrated, since the opportunity to succeed in the free market economy is precisely what the democratic state offers. Thus, nobody should be ashamed if his or her natural, in-born proclivities enable him or her to rise above the "ruck" (283).

Levinsky gives Cahan both a language—liberty and equality—and a topic—Jewish identity—with which socialism can confront and, hopefully, unseat the growing hegemony of Social Darwinian individualism in American society. Levinsky, we recall, finds his greatest enemy in "the concrete struggle of trade-unionism (which among the Jewish immigrants was practically but another name for socialism) against low wages or high rent" (519).

This defense of trade unionism lines up with the reformist socialism promoted by Eduard Bernstein. In *The Preconditions of Socialism* (1899), Bernstein defends his position against two audiences—Tocquevillian liberals and Marxian socialists—by drawing on, while radically transforming, the two words they agree are important: liberty and equality. On the one hand, he wants to assure his liberal readers that a socialist commitment to social and

political equality will not lead to a “tyranny of the majority”: “in our times, there is an almost unconditional guarantee that the majority in a democratic community will make no law that does lasting injury to personal freedom, for today’s majority can easily become tomorrow’s minority” (142). He then argues, to his socialist brethren, that a concession to liberalism does not compromise socialism: “The aim of all socialist measures, even of those that outwardly appear to be coercive measures, is the development and protection of the free personality” (147). If the worker is not free to do as s/he pleases under capitalism, Social Democracy helps him become free by “transforming the people’s representatives from being the masters into being the real servants of the people” (144). In its fully realized form, democracy would see “the abolition of class government, although it is not yet the actual abolition of classes” (143). The problem, as Laclau and Mouffe show, is that there is not yet a substitute for class as the political identity capable of radicalizing democracy within the liberal-democratic state.

In *Yekl*, Cahan’s aesthetic and political imagination could only go this far: although Gitl’s divorce from Jake enables her to form a Jewish-American identity, Cahan projects her “victory” in terms of the Marxian dialectic. Cahan appears to recognize the ambiguities of this position in the very act that causes Levinsky to relent to the unions. Through a “spy,” he hears that a woman he once considered proposing to for her money, Gussie, has given the last pennies in her savings account to the union: ““What do you want of me, murderers that you are? . . . Bleed me, bleed me, cruel people that you are!”” (521). This self-sacrifice for the good of the union reeks of the orthodox claim that the Jew must ultimately embrace his or her class identity in the final instance. It also evokes something much more sinister. In *The White Terror and the Red* (1905), his “Novel of Revolutionary Russia” set in 1881, Cahan shows how Jewish revolutionaries sacrificed their ethnic identities for the greater good of the Will of the People Party, which became problematic when it officially supported anti-Semitic

riots because they were said to augur the beginning of the revolution. Echoes of this violence, and Cahan's ambivalence about it, can be found in Gussie's self-sacrifice.

The question of Jewish political identity helps Cahan avoid this "option" of sacrificing ethnic identity for class identity. By focusing on the freedom, within a Left politics, to express oneself as a Jewish worker or a friend of the Jewish worker instead of a proletarian *tout court*, Cahan avoids the return of class essentialism in Bernstein's revisionism. Cahan seems to understand that the best response to someone like Levinsky is, first, to admit that the fight will play itself out in the confines of the liberal-democratic state—which means agreeing to the terms of the debate: liberty and equality—and, second, to create a Jewish political identity that is aligned with the socialist party in its attack on capitalism but which retains the freedom to explore uniquely Jewish issues (such as workers being exploited by their religious preference to take Saturday off). In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, this autonomous Jewish politics is made possible by Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward*, even if it is not explicitly named: "The socialist Yiddish daily, which had an overwhelmingly wide circulation now, printed reports of meetings at which I had been hissed and hooted. I was accused of bribing corrupt politicians who were supposed to help me suppress the strike by means of police clubs. I was charged with bringing disgrace upon the Jewish people" (520). The *Forward* not only contains the content of Cahan's response to Social Darwinism but is also the aesthetic form (the Yiddish-language socialist daily) that this response takes in both the real world and the text. This is Cahan's greatest realist gesture—he blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, aesthetics and politics, discourse and urban life via the subtle reference to the *Forward* in the pages of *The Rise of David Levinsky*.

The *Forward* does not use class-identity to police the boundary between Levinsky's beliefs and practices and its own. In fact, "American papers" and general "[p]ublic opinion"

join the *Forward's* fight “against [Levinsky]” along with “some German-Jewish financiers and philanthropists” (520). A new political identity—the Jewish Left—is cobbled together from those who “normally” identify as an Uptown or Downtown Jew, German Jew or Russian Jew, secular or Orthodox Jew, Marxian socialist or political democrat; and the very identity of this new formation, the sense of who “we” are, is formed in opposition to Levinsky, who brings “disgrace upon the Jewish people” (520). While in the throes of patriotic feeling, Levinsky suggests that Jews are not “persecuted” in the U.S. but Cahan and the members of the *Forward* know that this is not so (424). Recall that, in answer to one of the “Bintel Brief” letters detailing anti-Semitism in the workplace, the editor urged the writer to go to the United Hebrew Trades, who could “bring up the charges before the Machinists Union about this persecution” (*Bintel* 64). If the problem with the selfish Jewish individualist or the selfless Jewish Marxist is their distance from the Jewish “people,” then the *Forward* promises the creation of a political “we,” the Jewish Left, that absorbs all kinds of Jewish self-identification under a common umbrella by articulating this new political identity within the ongoing, international fight for greater social and political equality.

Chapter 4

Untimely Love:

Anarchy and Anachronism in *The Age of Innocence*

In her 1910 polemic “Marriage and Love,” Emma Goldman argues, contrary to popular opinion, that “marriage and love have nothing in common; they are as far apart as the poles; are, in fact, antagonistic to each other” (58). Marriage is a “State and Church-begotten weed” (65)—it is strict, repressive, hierarchical—while love is free and open to all. A force of anarchy, love breaks down hierarchies and, Goldman prophesies, will one day triumph throughout the world. In the Broadview edition of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), editor Michael Nowlin includes extracts from “Marriage and Love” in Appendix E: Wharton and Others on the Status of Women. As Nowlin remarks, the inclusion of this piece is both startling and apt: “Though Wharton hardly thought of herself as a feminist and was largely indifferent to the issue of women’s suffrage,” in novels like *The Age of Innocence* “she clearly represents the institution of marriage in a critical light . . . that uncannily resembles that cast by far more radical thinkers such as Goldman, the anarchist from the Lower East Side, who was deported from the United States in 1919” (374).

Even a barebones summary of the novel’s plot will make evident some of the points of comparison. Newland Archer, the perfect specimen of Old New York’s values—that is, the values of 1870s Manhattan elites who lived along Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to the edge of Central Park—intends to marry his sweetheart, the chaste and amiable May Welland. However, he falls for her worldly cousin, Ellen Olenska. Ellen appears in New York after leaving her “brute of a husband,” a Polish count “who kept her practically a prisoner” in Europe (Wharton, *Age* 87). Ellen’s presence causes Archer to view his social set’s marriage rituals as unequal (“[w]omen ought to be free—as free as we are”) though he

struggles to accept Ellen's desire for a divorce (88). "Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned," he tells a stunned Ellen. "Our legislation favours divorce—our social customs don't" (144). Archer goes through with his marriage to May, but he still loves Ellen with an intense passion. Although he has imagined throughout their courtship that May is "innocent," she suspects Archer and Ellen of being "lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to 'foreign' vocabularies" (319). May plots with other members of society to expel Ellen back to Europe. The last chapter of the novel jumps forward twenty-six years, when Archer has an opportunity to reconnect with Ellen in Paris after May's death. Archer, who considers himself a relic of a bygone era, decides not to rekindle his love with Ellen.

It has become commonplace in Wharton criticism to point out, as Nowlin does, that the politics of her novels belie or even subvert her personal politics. Despite an avowedly conservative worldview befitting her own Old New York upbringing, Wharton's novels engage in a proto-feminist critique of marriage, patriarchy, sexual oppression, and the social construction of femininity. Dale Bauer claims that Wharton's willingness to engage with the cultural debates of her time, like the free love movement's critique of marriage, produced "an intense, sometimes painful confrontation with her own presuppositions and expectations" (xv). Elizabeth Ammons posits an aesthetic and political *Bildung* punctuated by Wharton's charity work for Belgian war refugees: "Until the First World War taught her how to work corporately, she remained the perfect product of her old New York rearing which told her to refrain from personal, direct political actions and statements" (2). The war experience made "her think even harder and more deeply about her native land" and its ills—"[e]conomic dependence, sexual repression, the double standard, propriety marriage," all concerns of Goldman's (127). Cynthia Griffin Wolff marks a transition after Wharton's affair with Morton Fullerton from 1907 to 1910: in "[t]he group of novels that begins with

The Reef (1912) and concludes with *The Age of Innocence* (1920) . . . Wharton began to write about passion: sexual passion; the passion for acquisition, for experience, for love” (192).

Jennie Kassanoff has troubled narratives of Wharton’s progressivism by resurrecting a discussion of her conservatism on the issue of race (her dismay that America lacked a racially pure, “innocent” origin) and aesthetics (her attack on modernist experimentation as “pure anarchy in fiction”) (Wharton, *Writing* 14). “If her native land generously welcomed the world’s huddled masses,” Kassanoff writes, “then the novel, under Wharton’s neo-nativist laws of ‘pure English’ and her colonial determination to suppress ‘pure anarchy in fiction,’ formed an architectural, aesthetic and political bulwark against the menacing possibilities of democratic pluralism” (5). Kassanoff nonetheless intersects with the career arc described by Ammons and Wolff, this one matching historical ruptures with personal ones. After the affair with Fullerton and the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, which Wharton and others imagined as an allegory of class intermixing in the face of catastrophe, Wharton gave herself over to “the egalitarian temptations of pure sensation” in *The Reef* (6). *The Reef* is about the consequences of a brief affair between George Darrow and Sophy Vinter on the eve of Darrow reconnecting with a widowed woman to whom he plans to propose, the Old New Yorker Anna Leath. Kassanoff’s reading centers on Wharton’s notably anarchic description of Anna’s sexual awakening amidst the revelations of Darrow’s past with Sophy:

She recalled having read somewhere that in ancient Rome the slaves were not allowed to wear a distinctive dress lest they should recognize each other and learn their numbers and their power. So, in herself, she discerned for the first time instincts and desires, which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of mutiny. (*Reef* 290)

For Kassanoff, this represents a high-water mark for Wharton’s politics, though it is not her last foray into the anarchic possibilities of sex and love. After a relapse in *Summer* (1917),

with its defense of Yankee values, Wharton “conceded the inevitability of elite defeat” at the hands of democratic pluralism¹ and sexual experience in *The Age of Innocence* (7).

Ferdâ Asya has brought this discussion full-circle by explicitly linking Wharton’s postwar transformation with developments in the anarchist tradition. Wharton’s sympathetic reading of Whitman and Nietzsche during the Fullerton affair, Asya argues, was a crucial component of her “emotional and intellectual” development (41). What Wharton found “exhilarating” in Nietzsche, she explained in a 1908 letter, was not his “logic, but [his] wonderful flashes of insight, & a power of breaking through conventions” (*Letters* 159). Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* was “kept under lock and key” while Wharton was growing up (“brought out, like tobacco, only in the absence of ‘the ladies’”), moved her with his conception of lovers as “amies” or comrades, words she used in letters to Fullerton (qtd. in Asya 41).² Asya points out that Wharton shared this passion for Nietzsche and Whitman with Goldman and speculates that a cosmopolitan intellectual such as she was could not have avoided influential anarchist periodicals like Goldman’s *Mother Earth*. At the very least, “[i]n Wharton’s fiction, the basic motifs of anarchism are discernible in the constant struggle of the individual or community with oppressive familial, social, or political power” (43).

This may be so, but for Nowlin to claim that *Age* “uncannily resembles” Goldman’s “Marriage and Love” is, I want to argue, both accurate and misleading. Wharton, to begin with, skewers the free love movement with her brief send-up of “Dr. Agathon Carver, founder of the Valley of Love Community,” who makes the rounds with Ellen’s free-spirited aunt (*Age* 181). Yet Wharton’s writing during the Fullerton affair—*The Reef*, her letters to Fullerton, her Love Diary, and a poem written after their first night together—suggest that

¹ For a similar reading of Wharton’s politics, one more focused on New York City as the locus of democratic pluralism, see Griffith 21-49, 50-70.

² See also Price 387-388.

she *does* believe in the radical-democratic possibilities of love. Her worry is that, with the collapse of Old New York's traditions under the weight of historical "progress," the social and historical constraints *producing* the anarchic possibilities of love will be removed. For Wharton, the antagonism between love and marriage will not be resolved with love triumphing over Church and State. Instead, the poles of the antagonism can be momentarily reversed—instead of marriage dominating forever, love has its moments. Thus, Wharton looks for brief moments wherein love is unleashed, temporary unsettling and imperiling the hierarchical social order that otherwise blocks the possibility of such an expression.

In chapter 2, I argued that James rewrites a hegemonic masculine discourse on male/female relations in a democracy to name a mutual "privation" or antagonism between men and women in the production of urban space (45 51). Wharton, I claim here, rewrites a counter-hegemonic feminist critique of marriage. For her as for Goldman, the institution of marriage both creates a subordinate role for women and disproportionately oppresses them by blocking the free and equal expression of sexuality. But Wharton pushes her realism and her personal politics to their limits by courting antagonism for a radical-democratic aesthetics and politics of love. Wharton thereby solves one political problem that Howells could not while running aground on a familiar formal problem. Insofar as love is unspeakable before, during, and after its disruptive appearance, it is an example of what Jameson calls affect; but insofar as it radicalizes even Goldman's conception of love, it is more amenable to radical-democratic politics than Howells's "gay" transportation systems.³ Like Howells, however, Wharton learns that anarchic bodily feelings threaten the traditional lines and limits of realist narration, pushing her writing into the realm of modernism.

³ In chapter 1, I compared Howells's search for a positive feeling in and around public transportation to a poem by Wharton called "Terminus," which related the passions of lovers in a hotel to the screeching of train cars outside. This poem will be a central piece of what I call Wharton's aesthetics and politics of love.

To read Wharton's rethinking of the antagonism between love and marriage along these lines, I will turn to the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. Like Wharton, Rancière is deeply anti-utopian because the antagonistic relations between hierarchical social orders—what he calls the police—and radical-democratic expressions of equality will never be resolved. I agree with Asya, then, that Wharton's novelistic experiments with anarchism can benefit from "anachronistic approaches" that read later developments in politics and philosophy back into her work as a hermeneutic tool (39). Though Asya does not mention Rancière, the pairing is an intriguing one because both writers make a connection between radical politics and aesthetics. While Wharton disparaged modernism as "pure anarchy in fiction" (*Writing* 14), Rancière traces the "anarchy of writing" back to *Don Quixote* (*Mute* 98). Wharton's critique of modernism makes her conservatism a factor of her realism, but it also follows a similar line of reasoning as her critique of free love. Anarchy, like love, must be measured against constraint. The literary analogue for constraint, I argue, is the Aristotelian hierarchy of genres, which supplied rules for the proper kinds of novels, characters, settings, and readers. While Rancière claims that literary realism broke from this hierarchical genre system, the Old New York elite abided by similar rules in the 1870s—a part of their larger political ideology of civic republicanism, I will claim—and used them to try to quell Wharton's literary interests. What is most troubling about Wharton's conservatism, then, is that she appears to have retained Old New York's aesthetic and political values despite her own unhappy marriage and her mother's icy dismissal of the very idea of a woman novelist.

I will argue that Wharton unleashes the anarchic power of love in brief moments of formal experimentation, momentarily subverting Old New York's hierarchical worldview and her own realist practices. If anachronism is the critical mode of this chapter, this is because Wharton's version of aesthetic and political experimentation—her version of

“anarchy in fiction”—is a deliberate anachronism. In *Age*, where every element of 1870s New York is expertly recreated and every reference seemingly triple-checked, it is no coincidence that Wharton has Ellen and Archer express their love in an urban space—The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Central Park—that did not yet exist in this timeframe.

The next section will be a prolegomenon to my analysis of anarchic anachronism in “the Met” (as the museum is now commonly called). It will offer a deeper exploration of Wharton’s place in the anarchist tradition, stretching from Goldman’s anarcho-feminism to Rancière’s anti-utopian aesthetic politics. We will begin by resuming the comparison between Goldman’s “Marriage and Love” and *Age*, showing more similarities and, most importantly, the points of departure that put Wharton on an anachronistic track to Rancière.

I. Wharton, Goldman, Rancière: Marriage and Love in the Anarchist Tradition

Goldman’s “Marriage and Love” and Wharton’s *Age* both critique the institution of marriage as a hierarchical, heterosexual ritual that disproportionately oppresses women by threatening their life and wellbeing. Marriage is an unequal insurance policy, Goldman points out: “If . . . woman’s premium is her husband, she pays for it with her name, her privacy, her self-respect, her very life . . . Man, too pays his toll, but as his sphere is wider, marriage does not limit him as much as woman” (59). The worst inequality is felt in the sphere of sexuality:

From infancy, almost, the average girl is told that marriage is her ultimate goal; therefore her training and education must be directed towards that end. Like the mute beast fattened for slaughter, she is prepared for that. Yet . . . she is allowed to know much less about her function as wife and mother than the ordinary artisan of his trade. It is indecent and filthy for a respectable girl to know anything of the marital relation. . . . The prospective wife and mother is kept in complete ignorance of her only asset in the competitive field—sex. Thus she enters into life-long relations with a man only to find herself shocked, repelled, outraged beyond measure by the most natural and healthy instinct, sex. It is safe to say that a large percentage of the unhappiness, misery, distress, and physical suffering of matrimony is due to the criminal ignorance in sex matters that is being extolled as a great virtue. (60-61)

Newland Archer comes to learn these hard truths after Ellen Olenska returns to New York. Because of Ellen's example of worldly experience, Newland suspects that May's once-valued innocence is nothing but "an artificial product . . . cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow" (Wharton, *Age* 91). The echoes of Goldman's "mute beast fattened for slaughter" are hard to miss. We also find the ironic reversals that make Goldman's piece so biting: what is supposed to be pure, virtuous, or innocent is a social construct founded on sexual violence; but if a woman were to act on what Wharton, with Nietzsche in mind, called the "wholesome basis of naked instinct," she would be labeled one of *those* women and be expelled from polite society (Wharton, *Letters* 159). Indeed, "when 'such things happened' it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman" (Wharton, *Age* 132). Archer has freely sown his wild oats (an affair with a married woman, no less), while his betrothed is kept "innocent" by an "elaborate system of mystification": "She was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called 'the facts of life'" (90). Despite such moments of enlightened critique, Archer ends up participating in New York's "precise and inflexible" marriage rituals, all the while feeling "shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped" (75, 109).

Though placed in the mouth of her male protagonist, this was a critique that Wharton honed from her own personal experience, beginning with her 1879 "debut" in New York's marriage market. R.W.B. Lewis describes this moment using language from *Age*:

In the phrase Edith Wharton used about it, it was an age of innocence. The word applied in particular to the young girl, the debutante, whose single-minded purpose .

. . . was to make a suitable marriage. To this end her mother's function was to supply her with elegant clothes and make every arrangement to launch her upon a proper worldly career. It was not her mother's function, Edith Jones had to learn, to supply any hints about the real relationship between married men and women. About all that, the maternal contribution was an elaborate pattern of mystification, something which the mature Edith Wharton regarded with rancorous regret. (35)

Her mother's refusal to educate her on the facts of married life, in Wharton's own words, "did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect [her] whole life" (qtd. in Lewis 54). Unsurprisingly, her marriage to Teddy Wharton in 1885 proved to be disastrous (they failed to consummate the relationship for three weeks).⁴ Teddy, who suffered from what we would now call bipolar disorder, was given to bouts of jealousy or depression over Wharton's social and financial success as a writer. The Whartons divorced in 1913 after Edith learned that Teddy had stolen from her savings to provide a secret home for his lover in Boston.⁵ Wharton, by contrast, never told anyone about her affair with Fullerton (though Henry James was privy)—in fact, it was not known until her letters were published in 1988.

Love, in Goldman's formula, knows nothing of such inequity, suffering, and mutual disdain. Love is pure anarchy, making it "antagonistic" to the institution of marriage (58):

Love, the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy; love, the defier of all laws, of all conventions; love, the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny; how can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little State and Church-begotten weed, marriage? (64-65)

Love is not only free ("[a]s if love is anything but free!") but also fundamentally equalizing: "High on a throne, with all the splendor and pomp his gold can command, man is yet poor and desolate, if love passes him by. And if it stays, the poorest hovel is radiant with warmth, with life and color. Thus love has the magic power to make of a beggar a king" (65).

⁴ See Lewis 53.

⁵ See Lewis 275.

The clearest connections between Goldman and Wharton on the topic of love can be discerned in the latter's personal correspondence and private writings during the Fullerton affair. A shared delight in Whitman colors a common conception of love as a quasi-transcendental but also remarkably common force that melts hierarchies and social distinctions. In a study of the Fullerton letters, Kenneth Price writes: "That [they] are everywhere marked by references to 'comrades' and 'camaraderie' displays her longing for Whitmanian reciprocity and symmetry [and] her effort to reconceptualize traditional hierarchical roles" (386-387). Both Whitman and Wharton "thought of 'comrade' as an ambiguous term applicable to either a committed friendship or a loving, sexual relationship based on mutuality" (387). In her Love Diary, her musings on and imagined conversations with Fullerton, Wharton writes, in more Emersonian terms: "I feel as though all the mysticism in me—the transcendentalism that in other women turns to religion—were poured into my feeling for you, giving me a sense of immanence, of inseparableness from you" (qtd. in Price and McBride 673). Remarking on Fullerton's letters, "brought in on [a] breakfast-tray," Wharton likens herself to "a hungry beggar who crumbles up the crust he has found in order to make it last longer!" (675). The metaphor bears out Goldman's point: the anarchy of love disrupts, by inverting, the hierarchized relationship between king and beggar, splendor and poverty. Wharton, "who dominated life, stood aside from it," is now, in her words, "humbled, absorbed, without a shred of will or identity" (673).

In an unpublished poem, "Terminus" (1909), written the morning after a night with Fullerton in London's Charing Cross Hotel, Wharton refines her conception of love. Looking around the "common-place room of the inn / With its dull impersonal furniture," Wharton imagines "those others, the nameless, the many, / Who perhaps thus had lain and loved for an hour on the brink of the world" ("Terminus"). Kassanoff argues that, partly in

response to the “room’s democratic dinginess,” Wharton “is comforted, not repelled, by her sudden kinship with ‘the nameless, the many,’” “reveal[ing] [a] newfound compassion for the everyday experiences of the embodied multitude” (98, 99). For Wolff, the poem grounds the Love Diary’s mysticism in “the very heart of common, human experience” (198).

In reality, however, the Fullerton affair was one-sided and for that reason deeply frustrating for both parties. Fullerton was known for affairs with both men and women, while for Wharton this represented a decisive break not just with her husband but with her entire identity up to that point. Wharton’s rapturous letters to Fullerton were often met with silence, leaving her to remark on “how unequal the exchange is between us” (*Letters* 189). She was privy to the fact that Fullerton was being blackmailed by a past lover using letters proving his sexual relationship with Ronald Gower,⁶ but this did not seem to bother her in the way one might expect based on her reputation. Instead, her sensibilities were tested to the breaking point by Fullerton’s secret engagement to Katherine Fullerton, who was raised as his sister but was discovered to be a first cousin when they were adults.⁷ For these reasons alone we can start to articulate a divergence between Goldman and Wharton that will become clearer in *Age*. Despite similar ideas about love as an equalizing force, Wharton was far more skeptical than Goldman about the realities of free love and unfettered sexuality.

In *Age*, such skepticism is voiced by Ellen, who returns to New York seeking her family’s blessing on a divorce from her abusive husband, only to fall in love with a man (Archer) who counsels her to remain married out of consideration for social decorum. Archer even moves up the date of his own wedding to avoid the temptations represented by Ellen. “Is it your idea,” Ellen asks Archer pointedly, “that I should live with you as your

⁶ See Lewis 198-199.

⁷ See Lewis 200-202; Wolff 198.

mistress—since I can't be your wife?" (*Age* 284). Archer, in his defense, has come to think of love in terms that are beyond the official decrees of Church and State as well as loaded terms like "mistress": "I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other" (284). Two human beings who love each other: here we find the ideal of love as Whitmanesque reciprocity that Wharton expressed in the Fullerton letters. Ellen, armed with Wharton's worldly experience, checks this utopian fantasy:

Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulonge, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous. (285)

This is a powerfully anti-utopian, and hence realistic, statement on the limits of cosmopolitan freedom, which is all too often held open as the salve for Old New York's oppressive worldview. Asya, in fact, implies that Wharton's brand of anarchism is utopian to the degree that it is cosmopolitan; that is, it is couched in the individual and social freedom represented by Europe as well as Wharton's transatlantic reading regimen, which included many of Goldman's precursors if not Goldman herself.⁸ Whatever her stance on cosmopolitanism, Goldman is certainly utopian: "Some day, some day men and women will rise, they will reach the mountain peak, they will meet big and strong and free, ready to receive, to partake, and to bask in the golden rays of love" (67). Wharton not only refuses to valorize free love but, quite the opposite, attacks the abandonment of social and sexual taboos in postwar society, where seemingly everything and everybody is accepted. As the heroine of *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) notes, if the postwar world represents the "new tolerance," "she had not yet discovered the new prohibitions" (Wharton, *Mother's* 49).

⁸ See Asya 40-41, 44.

Wharton gives Ellen and Archer the chance to experience this new world order in the last chapter of *Age*. Archer, however, refuses to enter Ellen's Parisian apartment, an illogical act of self-denial that Goldman would no doubt reject as such. Framed against his son's acceptance of his father's past love, though, Archer's position is clear: "The difference is that these young people take it for granted that they're going to get whatever they want, and that we almost always took it for granted that we shouldn't. Only, I wonder—the thing one's so certain of in advance: can it ever make one's heart beat so wildly?" (Wharton, *Age* 334). Wharton draws even more radical conclusions about the central antagonism in Goldman's "Marriage and Love." For Goldman, love and marriage are "antagonistic" for being "as far apart as the poles" (58); but she believed that one day, with "the reorganization of our social life, based upon the principles of economic justice," "man and woman can meet without antagonism and opposition" and hence embrace radical love (27). Wharton suggests that love is not antagonistic to marriage in the sense of being its opposite; rather, love is felt at the point where oppressive forces block the expression of sexual freedom and equality. This also makes love quite rare: "The trenchant divisions between right and wrong, honest and dishonest, respectable and the reverse, had left so little scope for the unseen" (Wharton, *Age* 332). Without the taboos set by Church and State to police the boundaries of marriage, love loses its anarchic potential. That being said, there is no world without "prohibitions"—it's just harder to find them in the "new tolerance" (*Mother's* 49). Without "the old . . . sign-posts and danger signals," Archer adds his own prohibition on reconnection so he can feel a love that is "more real than if [he] went up" (*Age* 340).⁹

Wharton's rethinking of Goldman's antagonism between love and marriage prefigures, and can thus be further articulated through, the antagonism between the

⁹ This moment is Lacanian, *avant la lettre*: desire outstrips fulfillment. See Barrish, *White* 122-126; Bauer 13.

police order and democratic politics in the philosophy of Jacques Rancière. In one of the first English-language monographs on Rancière, Todd May argued that Rancière belongs to the anarchist tradition because he rejects the Marxian diagnosis of a “single site of oppression” (the class struggle) in modern society (May 80); rather, with his concept of the police, Rancière explodes the sites of possible oppressions, which, turning to the language of this study, are relations of inferiority/superiority that become sites of antagonism when held against the democratic promise of freedom and equality for all. The police order names a hierarchical distribution of the entire sensible world, giving everything and everybody their proper place, role, function, or identity. “Police” does not refer to a specific institution—the actual police, for example, or marriage—but to a pervasive logic about the scope, feeling, and consistency of sociopolitical life. Rancière identifies politics with the claim to equality wielded by those who have been excluded and/or left voiceless by the police order (“the part with no part”). Democratic politics is “antagonistic to policing” (Rancière, *Disagreement* 29) in the sense that the appearance of the “part with no part” and the language of equality call into question the naturalness and self-sufficiency of the *arkhē*, the “logic [that] presupposes that a determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority” (*Dissensus* 30).

Though he has been taken to task for distorting Rancière’s politics via the forced connection to anarchism,¹⁰ May claims that Rancière represents the development of a line of thinking that *could have* but never did emerge from the classical tradition. There are two schools of classical anarchism, he claims: individualist and collectivist/communist. Individualists stress individual liberty without interference (and can be easily articulated with a neoliberal or Social Darwinian defense of the free market and non-interventionist state, as we saw in the previous chapter). Communist anarchists, like Abraham Cahan in his younger

¹⁰ See Chambers 75-87.

years, believed in individual and collective freedom from oppression, with the idea that a freer society would be an equal one. The problem for May is that this tradition subordinates equality to liberty while imagining a future where any tensions between these concepts (like the exercise of free will conflicting with the promise of equal outcomes) will be eliminated. This utopian vision prevented communist anarchists from acknowledging the irreconcilability of equality and liberty, something that also bothered Cahan and caused his break with anarchism.¹¹ May imagines a different conclusion from the same discursive elements: an anarchist who privileges equality over liberty while resisting the temptations of utopian thinking. He then imagines Rancière emerging from this third path: “Democratic politics, for him, is a rare event, one that does not lead to a final state of justice but perhaps only to better conditions in a police order. Democratic politics . . . lies in the expression of equality rather than in the end-state it achieves” (99).

Wharton has many characteristics of the would-be anarchist paving the way for Rancière. A few elements of this anachronistic anarchist legacy have already been detailed in Wharton’s anti-utopianism and her “rhetoric of equality” in the Fullerton letters (Price 386); indeed, she appears to have subordinated Whitman’s expression of individual freedom and rosy-eyed utopianism to his equalizing claims about comradeship, which she realized could not last, individually or socially. This is because love cannot exist without the very forces that make its anarchic expression rare and unforeseeable and ultimately doomed to fail.

Before directly comparing Wharton to Rancière, it would be best to understand how she breaks from the classical anarchist tradition as May describes it. Asya claims that Wharton combines individualist anarchism and collectivist anarchism in *The Children* (1928). The titular children—step-siblings who travel across Europe without their overbearing

¹¹ See Cahan, *Education* 332-333.

parents—represent a “microcosmic anarchist community” while their “parents epitomize the type of government by which they refuse to be ruled” (Asya 45-46). They are joined, in Asya’s reading, by the consummate individualist Martin Boyne, whose cooperation with and temporary guardianship of the children represent Wharton’s attempt to “fuse” individualist and collectivist anarchism (52). Wharton, however, signals the impossibility of Boyne’s dream of his life with the children, in a move akin to Archer’s realization that imagination is more “real” than reality.¹² Through a reading of Ernst Bloch on daydreams, Asya finds that, despite her persistent anti-utopianism, Wharton wants to “shift the place of anarchism and utopianism from the terrain of the imagination to the domain of reality” (56). This conclusion is both correct and misleading. While Wharton does want to shift politics from the imagination to reality (she is not content to leave the expression of Ellen and Archer’s love to the latter’s imagination), she can only accomplish this through the anarchic possibilities of writing itself. The connection between Wharton and Rancière is most evident in their sense of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Aesthetics, in other words, is the third point in the anachronistic trajectory from classical anarchism to Wharton and then to Rancière, after anti-utopianism and the “rhetoric of equality” (Price 386).

Rancière argues that democratic politics has an aesthetic quality insofar as the once-excluded group plays the part of all those who have no part in a hierarchical power structure, the *demos*, thereby reconfiguring what is normally seen, heard, or felt in the world as we know it. Politics is a mode of aesthetic dis-identification from the role in which one was placed in the police order. It “invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by

¹² Years later, Boyne has a chance to reconnect with Judith, the eldest and de facto leader of her siblings, to whom he has a deeply buried attraction (his fiancée breaks off their engagement for this reason); but Boyne chooses not to pursue Judith after watching her dance at a gala. “Then he got up and walked away into the night” (Wharton, *The Children* 281-282). *Age* ends with a similar line: “Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel” (Wharton, *Age* 341).

inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and inaudible, new distributions of space and time—in short, new bodily capacities” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 139). This is what Wharton seems to have felt in the Charing Cross hotel room after a night with Fullerton. She had been taught by her mother to be a nice girl who avoids talking about sex and by society to respect the marriage vow (even if her husband does not); but she now experiences the feelings denied to her, opening a radical identification with the nameless and forgotten:

The bed with its soot-sodden chintz, the grime of its brasses,
That has borne the weight of fagged bodies, dust-stained, averted in sleep,
The hurried, the restless, the aimless—perchance it has also thrilled
With the pressure of bodies ecstatic, bodies like ours,
Seeking each other's souls in the depths of unfathomed caresses,
And through the long windings of passion emerging again to the stars . . .
Yes, all this through the room, the passive & featureless room,
Must have flowed with the rise & fall of the human unceasing current;
And lying there hushed in your arms, as the waves of rapture receded,
And far down the margin of being we heard the low beat of the soul,
I was glad as I thought of those others, the nameless, the many,
Who perhaps thus had lain and loved for an hour on the brink of the world;
Secret and fast in the heart of the whirlwind of travel,
The shaking and shrieking of trains, the night-long shudder of traffic,
Thus, like us they have lain & felt, breast to breast in the dark,
The fiery rain of possession descend on their limbs while outside
The black rain of midnight pelted the roof of the station;
And thus some woman like me, waking alone before dawn,
While her lover slept, as I woke & heard the calm stir of your breathing,
Some woman has heard as I heard the farewell shriek of the trains
Crying good-bye to the city & staggering out into darkness,
And shaken at heart has thought: “So must we forth in the darkness,
Sped down the fixed rail of habit by the hand of implacable fate—
So shall we issue to life, & the rain, & the dull dark dawning . . .” (“Terminus”)

Wharton identifies with other “nameless” lovers whose passion falls outside of, is excessive to, the normal distribution of people and places, emotions and affects. The “fixed rail of habit” will eventually carry her back into this dominant distribution of the sensible. In this moment, however, the hotel bed expands to include not just forgotten lovers but the “weight of fagged bodies, dust-stained, averted in sleep / The hurried, the restless, the

aimless”: in other words, ghosts of all sorts who become more real, more visible and audible, than the people, places, and things in “the waste lands” outside.

Yet, this aesthetic identification with the nameless is mediated through the act of writing itself. Rancière compares the aesthetic dimension of politics to the political work done by aesthetics: “If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus . . . [as] a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible” (*Dissensus* 140). He also makes a razor-thin distinction between art and politics. Politics creates forms of “subjectification,” “the framing of a *we*, a subject [of] a collective demonstration whose emergence is the [antagonistic] element that disrupts the distribution of social parts” (141-142). Art, by disrupting the sensible fabric, alerts us to the impersonal flow of atoms that call into question the singularity of human individuality (affect, we named it in chapter 1). Politics frames collective identities; art challenges singular identities. One might lead to the other but “no direct cause-effect is determinable between the intention realized in an art performance and a capacity for political subjectivation” (140-141).

The fine line between aesthetics and politics has troubled many of Rancière’s sympathetic critics, but to a certain degree Wharton would have appreciated the distinction. She compared the aesthetic and the sociopolitical effects of art, as we will see, but she dismissed overtly political novels as propaganda.¹³ The politics of her poem, to stick with that for a moment, inheres in the breaking apart of identity in the face of “impersonal” furniture, the weight of past travelers (lovers as well as “faceless automata”) on the worn springs of the bed, the shrieking of the train—all of which become radically equivalent in a Whitmanesque catalogue (“Terminus”). The political identification between Wharton and the nameless—which she pitted against the unequal role she played her whole life and will

¹³ See Bauer 59.

return to on “the fixed rail of habit”—becomes, in the act of writing, the temporary and contingent equivalence of objects, people, and feelings in the space of the poetic catalogue.

When we turn to the art of novel-writing, as opposed to Wharton’s unpublished foray into Whitmanesque poetry, these conclusions become more complicated. Wharton views “modern art” as ceaselessly “cultivat[ing] the ground [Balzac and Stendhal] cleared for it” by transforming the aristocratic stick-figures from works like Madame de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) into real people (*Writing* 8). Similarly, Rancière stages an ongoing clash between the “aesthetic regime of art” and the “representative regime of arts.” If politics disrupts the police order, the aesthetic regime of art—which includes novels, poetry, photography, and film—faces off against Aristotle’s hierarchical system of genres: “There were high genres, devoted to the imitation of noble actions and characters, and low genres devoted to common people and base subject matters. [Aristotle] also submitted style to a principal of hierarchical convenience: kings had to act and speak as kings do, and common people as common people do” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 156). Flaubert’s realism first disrupted this logic with a democratic indifference to its subject matter (a rural wife is as good a heroine as any) and an impersonal style (anybody could be speaking and anything could be narrated). Wharton, however, associates both trends with modernism, which she denigrates as “anarchy in fiction” (*Writing* 14). We again come face-to-face with the problem of her conservatism, which can now be viewed as having parallel political and aesthetic aims.

Frederick Wegener has displayed the degree to which Wharton held fast to an ideology of “good form” that applied to both good society and good fiction. What raises Wharton’s concern about modernism is that “in devising techniques like stream of consciousness, the new novelists have been insufficiently ‘selective’ [by] favoring with imaginative treatment certain areas of society and members of certain classes instead of

selecting them *out* as somehow inherently unsuitable” (Wegener, “Form” 125). Stream of consciousness is both anarchy on the level of form (*anything* can enter the mind in stream of conscious prose) and content (we can enter *anybody’s* head); and it has a social equivalent in the flattening of distinctions with the standardization of life in the postwar world.¹⁴ What is most fascinating, because paradoxical, about Wharton’s “antimodernist criticism” is that (132), as Wegener puts it elsewhere, “[s]uch remarks . . . remind us of how lightly this American novelist regarded the writers of the literary tradition to which she belonged” (“Enthusiasm” 33). To name only the American literary realists in this study, W.D. Howells, Cahan, Charles Chesnutt, and James (of *The Bostonians*) introduced everyday people/subjects to reading audiences; and James’s late style makes everyone sound the same.¹⁵ Aside from Proust, whose drawing-room settings made him an exception,¹⁶ the development of modern fiction into modernism gave Wharton pause; but she overshoots the mark in critiquing it, retreating to a hierarchical aesthetics that held sway before the advent of realism, where the right kind of people speak in the proper way to the right audience.

As with Wharton’s parallel between aesthetic and social form, Rancière clarifies that the hierarchy of genres “[w]as not simply an academic constraint. There was a homology between the rationality of poetic fiction and the intelligibility of human actions, conceived as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking” (*Dissensus* 156). In other words, the hierarchy of genres is the literary equivalent of the police distribution of the sensible. Yet, as we have seen, Wharton’s post-Fullerton novels are aimed at critiquing if not undermining hierarchical systems whose aesthetic and social constraints she felt

¹⁴ See Wegener, “Form” 130-132. Without critiquing the movement as Wharton does, Rancière notes a similar trajectory whereby a politically-active modernist literature “welcome[s] into its pages the standardized messages of the world” (*Politics* 27), with the example being Dos Passos’s *USA* trilogy. See Rancière, *Politics* 27-28.

¹⁵ See Kurnick 144-152.

¹⁶ See Wharton, *Writing* 151-178.

personally. When, as a little girl, she showed her first piece of writing to her mother—a dialogue that ends, “If I had only known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room”—her mother responded: “drawing rooms are always tidy” (qtd. in Lewis 30). They are always tidy in good literature as in good society—that is, a well-policed society. The “good form” that Wharton defends in her “antimodernist criticism” is parallel to the worldview that her novels attack. Her own writing was not even accepted in the aesthetic and social hierarchy she defends. Amy Kaplan reads Wharton’s mother’s response to her first story as the origin for her realism, where upper-class life appears unreal and detached from the “real” world “out there,” in the streets and in the literary marketplace (reversing the ideology of Howellsian realism).¹⁷ “If the lady of leisure adorns the unreal hothouse of the drawing room,” Kaplan writes, “the professional author exposes the reality of its underlying untidiness and the concealed work that produces it. The professional realist then takes her own product out of the home and the drawing room to the streets of the market” (70).

By critiquing modernist innovation, Wharton defends an aesthetic and sociopolitical ideology from which her favorite writers and her own writing/life dramatically broke. What do we make of these contradictory commitments? Wharton found an ingenious way both to adhere to “good form” *and* to expose the moral and political untidiness of the drawing room. The novels she liked best—the realism of Balzac and Stendhal—placed characters in a social/historical “order” that set constraints on “individual appetites” (Wharton, *Writing* 13-14). Thus, she thought of realism as the proper form to represent and yet still critique oppressive hierarchical orders like Old New York. Rancière, too, takes Balzac as the example of a third kind of “politics of literature” and hence a third way, beyond democratic subjects

¹⁷ In chapter 1, we saw that Howells is aware of the ideological limits of his own novelistic practice and aims to spread “real equality” from the drawing room to the streets via public transportation.

and style, to dissociate the “modern” novel from the representative regime. Balzac is “a geologist or archaeologist exploring the labyrinths of the social world . . . He gathers remnants, exhumes fossils, and transcribes signs that bear witness to a world and write a history” (Rancière, *Aesthetic Unconscious* 37). “The naturalist and geologist Balzac is also a doctor able to detect, at the heart of the intense activity of individuals and societies, a sickness identical to this intensity” (38). The literary equality involved lies in the idea that anything and everything from a particular time mutely “speaks,” to the expert at least. Aligning this aesthetic practice with Freudian dream analysis and Marxian commodity critique,¹⁸ Rancière deems it “side politics” since it gives up the egalitarian indifference of style and subject for an expert’s symptomatic analysis of exhumed fossils (*Dissensus* 163). This is what Wharton is looking for, though—to distinguish her realism from the oppressive aspects of her upbringing without associating it aesthetically or politically with the twinned anarchic developments of modernist experimentation and postwar social tolerance.

Nir Evron describes *The Age of Innocence* in terms that happen to echo Rancière: “Wharton . . . has her narrator assume the detached tone of the archaeologist who patiently and dispassionately reconstructs a lost age” (46). Nancy Bentley speaks of Wharton’s “science of manners,” likening her to an anthropologist, an ethnographer, an archeologist, and a museum curator. Wharton herself used archeology as a metaphor for her method of imaginatively returning to Old New York: “The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it” (*Backward* 7). Wharton’s 1921 letter about a stage production of *Age* speaks volumes about her feelings on historical accuracy:

¹⁸ See Rancière, *Aesthetic Unconscious* 36-37.

I am very anxious about the staging & dressing. I could do every stick of furniture & every rag of clothing myself, for every detail of that far-off scene was indelibly stamped on my infant brain. . . . Of course [the male actors] ought all to have moustaches, & not tooth brush ones, but curved & slightly twisted at the ends. They should wear dark grey frock-coats & tall hats, & always buttonhole-violets by day, a gardenia in evening dress. White waistcoats with their evening clothes, & pumps, *I think*. . . . After all, beg [the director] to avoid slang & Americanisms, & tell her that English was then the language spoken by American ladies & gentlemen . . . Few people nowadays know that many of the young men of our day (in N.Y.) were educated in English Universities, & that English tutors & governesses were frequent & that *no* girl went to a school! (*Letters* 439)

Historical accuracy is only part of the job requirement for the realist-cum-archeologist. The other part is to locate a tension produced at meeting of social expectations and individual beliefs, feelings, or actions. The last line of her list above, which appears as an afterthought, is significant in this respect: “*no* girl went to a school!” As Goldman points out, “all her training and education must be directed toward” her future marriage (60). *Age*, we have seen, is clear-eyed in its attack on marriage. I am now prepared to argue that Wharton’s realism offers an expert representation and critique of Old New York as a police order intent on quelling the equalizing possibilities of love. Indeed, Anna Leath, heroine of Wharton’s *The Reef*, “looked back with melancholy derision on her old conception of life, as a kind of well-lit and well-policed suburb to dark places one need never know about” (322).

Instead of providing space for an affair of the type she had with Fullerton, which for her was momentarily equalizing but ultimately imbalanced, Wharton appears to be complicit in the policing of such desire in *Age*. Hence readers’ dissatisfaction with the ending: why *couldn’t* Ellen and Archer finally consummate their relationship? Yet, to appreciate the politics of *Age*, we need to recall Wharton’s anti-utopianism. The point is not to hold up to twentieth-century readers—those living in the wake of women’s suffrage, achieved the year the novel was published (1920)—how much better they have it compared to cramped and unequal 1870s New York. The point, on the contrary, is to show that the old prohibitions

created an intensity of feeling, a kind of love, that is lost amongst the “new tolerance” (*Mother's* 49). But what would that kind of love look like, feel like, or read like?

In chapter XXXI of *Age*, Archer and Ellen share a final private moment before Ellen is expelled from the Old New York “tribe” by stealing away together to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (319). It is here that Ellen and Archer express their love for each other one last time. “The museum site is highly significant,” as Bentley notes, but not just because it “links Wharton’s fiction to the new institution of the museum” (55, 57). Especially for a space associated with the “science” of culture, the moment is suffused with an aura of untimeliness that the lovers seem to recognize: “‘It’s odd,’ Madame Olenkska said, ‘I never came here before’”; Archer responds: “‘Ah, well—Some day, I suppose, it will be a great Museum’” (299). When Archer first recommends “the Art Museum—in the Park,” Ellen “look[s] puzzled” (298). As many critics have noted, this moment is anachronistic: the novel takes place in the early 1870s but the Met did not move to Central Park until 1880. One of the exhibits Wharton mentions was not donated until 1887.¹⁹ Wharton became annoyed when critics pointed out anachronisms in the novel, telling her editor in a 1921 letter that her “allusions range from, say, 1875 to 1885. Any narrower field of evocation must necessarily reduce the novel to a piece of archeological pedantry instead of a living image of the times” (“From”). Yet, she proceeded to correct other historical errors in later printings, effectively confirming her novel as a piece of “archeological pedantry.” She did not change the anachronistic reference to “the Art museum—in the Park,” however (*Age* 298). This is because the anachronistic time-place provides a spark of energy and life at the antagonistic point of impact between sociopolitical constraints, aesthetic form, and individual passions

¹⁹ See Roffman 227-228; Wharton, *Age* 299 n. 1.

Recall that the problem with the anarchy of modern fiction is the making of formlessness into a condition of form, eliminating the aesthetic and sociopolitical constraints that make for the expression of intense feelings in great literature. Wharton's realism, by contrast, leaves her beholden to the constraints of Old New York via the need for historical accuracy even while critiquing its marriage rituals. Chronologically, the museum sequence in chapter XXXI stands between the novel's expert re-creation of the 1870s (chapters I-XXX) and its brief study of the twentieth century in chapter XXXIV; but after the trip to the Met in chapter XXXI, we return to the 1870s for two chapters before fast-forwarding. In the anachronistic, untimely space of the museum, Wharton gives figuration to objects and people that time has forgotten (archaeological artifacts from ancient Cyprus and a ghostly museum attendant). Like Wharton in "Terminus," Ellen and Archer's love becomes political when they identify with the nameless and the forgotten. And Wharton's writing becomes anarchic when it represents ghosts as "living images" with whom one can identify ("From"). Ellen and Archer's love is radically anachronistic²⁰—it is both ahead of its time and a relic of a bygone time—paralleling the anarchy on the level of form that is achieved by Wharton's anachronism. On the level of form and content, then, Wharton deliberately courts the anarchy of modernism. To introduce forgotten bodies and voices into the novel, Wharton learned, much like Howells before her, that she must cease writing realism. In this case, she transgresses the realist prohibition on anachronism to give her characters, herself, and her readers an impossible time-space to feel radically different from what we have been taught.

Before arriving at this conclusion, though, we need to be more precise about what Wharton is up against in both her anachronistic and archaeological modes. The simple answer is the institution of marriage. But, as Wharton knew, marriage is part of a much

²⁰ See Coviello on the radical possibilities of anachronistic or untimely love.

larger sociopolitical logic. I have already suggested that Old New York is an example of the police order (defined as a hierarchical distribution of the sensible), against which both Wharton and her characters are pitted. Rancière claims that there are different kinds of police orders,²¹ so we need to be specific about the logic evinced by Old New York. This police order, I argue, is a species of civic republicanism for its emphasis on the common good (“The individual . . . is nearly always sacrificed to . . . the collective interest”), education, “Civic Virtue,” and good breeding (Wharton, *Age* 145, 207). The connection with the above is Aristotle, one of the forerunners of civic republicanism.²² Wharton is historical enough to show how, why, and to what end republicanism took hold in 1870s New York. The effect is the mutual defamiliarization of Old New York and the republican tradition in the U.S. As Archer’s mother states, Old New York is not an “aristocracy” but extends back to the early American Republic: “One of your great-grandfathers signed the Declaration, and another was a general on Washington’s staff . . . These are things to be proud of, but they have nothing to do with rank or class” (94); and, as Rancière insists, what we normally think of as democratic politics—in the U.S., a representative democracy that was first called a republic—is actually a form of police rule antagonistic to democratic politics.²³

II. “Our Little Republican Distinctions”: Old New York and/as the Police

Archer’s mother places New York’s ruling families, who double as the characters of *Age*, in a hierarchical pyramid of power: the van der Luydens and other descendants of Dutch and English royalty are at the top; the Newlands and other descendants of the old mercantile elite are in the middle; and on the bottom are “plain people”; an honourable but

²¹ See Chambers 72.

²² See Mouffe, *Return* 24.

²³ The classical work of political theory differentiating the American republic from the disorder associated with Greek democracy (Rancière’s reference) is James Madison’s “Federalist No. 10.” See Hamilton et al. 53-62.

obscure majority of respectable families who (as in the case of the Spicers or the Leffertses or the Jacksons) had been raised above their level by marriage” (Wharton, *Age* 93). With this image, Wharton exhumes a building from her first memory of New York, described in her autobiography as “the truncated Egyptian pyramid which so strangely served as a reservoir for New York’s water supply” (*Backward* 2). This is the Croton Reservoir, built in 1842 on Manhattan’s highest point between Fortieth and Forty-Second Street on Fifth Avenue, which funneled drinking water to Lower Manhattan until it was demolished in 1890 to make room for the New York Public Library (see fig. 4). The reservoir was a popular gathering place for the elite but Wharton uses it to define the socio-spatial scope of Old New York, including its ability to pull from and distribute a logic beyond its small bounds.



Figure 4: The Croton Reservoir

Source: <http://www.bryantpark.org/about-us/history.html>

Like the Croton Reservoir, the very tip of Old New York’s family pyramid is defined by its absence: the van der Luydens “stood above all of them [but] had faded into a kind of super-terrestrial twilight, from which only two figures impressively emerged; those of Mr. and Mrs. Henry van der Luyden” (95). Even then, Henry and Louisa are out of town most

of the year. Ellen hits on something profound when she wonders whether the reason for their “great influence [is] that they make themselves so rare” (115). One is reminded of Claude Lefort’s description of the empty place of power in democracy: once “the people” replace the king’s body as the site of power, this place remains empty, even while occupied by elected officials for fixed periods of time.²⁴ James Wilson—who, like Archer’s great-grandfather, signed the Declaration—similarly conceived of republican government as a pyramid resting on the firm foundation of “the people” and rising to the preeminence of elected leaders. His lasting influence is the truncated pyramid on the one-dollar bill, where the Eye of Providence floats where the top should be.²⁵ Such imagery plays into Wharton’s description of Old New York’s social pyramid, starting with the “super-terrestrial” absence of the van der Luydens on top. The base of the pyramid, however, is rigidly defined, “with old Catherine Spicer ruling one end of Fifth Avenue, and Julius Beaufort the other” (93). These are Mrs. Archer’s “plain people” (93): Catherine Spicer—Ellen’s trend-setting grandmother who married “up” into the Mingott clan—builds a mansion “modelled on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy” south of Central Park, around Fifty-Seventh Street (65); and Beaufort, a banker of obscure origins (that “he passed for an Englishman” suggests he is Jewish) lives north of Washington Square (70).

“Beyond [this] small and slippery pyramid . . . lay the almost unmapped quarter inhabited by artists, musicians, and ‘people who wrote’” (135). This is where Ellen rents an apartment, scandalizing her family: “It was not the peril but the poverty that her family disliked; but that shade escaped her, and she supposed they considered literature compromising” (138). “Literature and art,” in fact, “were deeply respected in the Archer set,

²⁴ See Lefort 17-20.

²⁵ See Kloppenberg, *Toward* 398, 423.

and Mrs. Archer was always at pains to tell her children how much more agreeable and cultivated society had been when it included such figures as Washington Irving” (136). The literature they recognize is written by men you would invite into your home, literally and figuratively (in the act of reading). In other words, literature participates in an aesthetic *and* social hierarchy. Ellen’s place on the “thinly settled outskirts” is not a coincidence (141): she has the sensibilities of an artist, with her craft being interior decoration.²⁶ When Archer visits her apartment, his senses are awakened to an arrangement of art that he literally could not see before because of his education in the fine arts, with its hierarchy of schools and genres: “these pictures bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) when he travelled in Italy” (111).

While artists and unclassifiable art occupy a fringe location in Old New York’s social pyramid, a swath of bodies, voices, and professions do not seem to count. Lewis describes this population in terms that give full meaning to the phrase “distribution of the sensible”:

The New York that struck the fancy of Edith’s future friend William Dean Howells when he and his wife moved down from Boston in the 1880s—the New York of cablecars and Italian grocers, German immigrants and Russian refugees, Mott Street, Chatham Square, and the picturesque litter of Third Avenue: all this was invisible and inaudible to the world in which Edith Jones was decorously growing up. (22)

Kaplan uses the term “mob” to describe those voices and bodies just outside what Wharton calls the “tight little citadel of New York” (Kaplan 102, *Age* 79). According to Jean Carol Griffith, however, Wharton’s local color realism departs from that of its nineteenth-century predecessor—which imagined an insulated, lily-white region—by showing elites rubbing elbows with characters of uncertain origins. While Wharton thus recognizes the democratic pluralism of the American city, she remains ambivalent about these interlopers.²⁷

²⁶ This was one of Wharton’s many artistic skills as well. See Wharton and Ogden, *Decoration*.

²⁷ See Griffith 40-49.

In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Dos Passos quotes a (fake) news story about a snake emerging from the old Croton Reservoir, scaring fashionable “[l]adies” (29); for Archer’s set, the mysterious banker Beaufort is a snake in Old New York’s garden. Mrs. Archer says, of her youth, “[i]t was perfectly easy to place any one then; now one can’t tell, and I prefer not to try” (Wharton, *Age* 136). Yet, New York still “places” Beaufort. New York’s “authority on ‘family,’” Sillerton Jackson, “was supposed to be the only man who could have told you who Julius Beaufort . . . really was” (63). To assist him, his sister provides “bits of minor gossip that filled out usefully the gaps in his picture” (80). The police distribution of the sensible is defined by the attempt to fill all voids, to have everything and everyone categorized to facilitate social interaction and decision-making. “New York society was, in those days, far too small, and too scant in resources, for every one in it (including livery-stable-keepers, butlers and cooks) not to know exactly on which evenings people were free” (93). At any given hour at his club, to which Beaufort belongs, Archer not only knows “what they were likely to be talking about, but the part each one would take in the discussion” (122).

The narrator of the 1870s story in Wharton’s decade-by-decade chronicle of her mother’s era, aptly titled *Old New York*, explains how certain groups can be counted in society but then stripped of the right to speak: “[the Fifth Avenue hotel] was frequented by ‘politicians’ and ‘Westerners,’ two classes of citizens whom my mother’s intonation always seemed to deprive of their vote by ranking them with illiterates and criminals” (*Old* 183). The more pointed comparison is unspoken: in the 1870s, women were counted as citizens but were prevented from voting; their realm was the private sphere, the logic went.²⁸ In *Age*, women are accounted for in the pyramid but society’s authorities—Lefferts on “Form” and Jackson on “Family”—are male. Still, Ammons has found that some critics see matriarchal

²⁸ See chapter 2 for James’s different conception of male and female “roles” in the production of urban space.

elements in the novel. For example, Catherine Mingott wields great social influence and Henry van der Luyden often defers to his wife. However, Ammons argues that this is still a patriarchal society, with Henry van der Luyden at its apex. Catherine Mingott, she points out, is obese and thus literally confined to her home while it is ultimately Henry who “wields the power” in the van der Luyden household and in New York society (Ammons 150).

Henry van der Luyden’s reference to “our little republican distinctions” best describes Old New York’s official form of self-rule (Wharton, *Age* 127). In the republican tradition inherited and practiced by the Founding Fathers, wealth, property, and birth, in some order, determined who was qualified to participate in public life.²⁹ In Old New York, the van der Luydens achieve the highest distinction because they are the descendants of the Dutch Patroon system, under which colonialists were given land to lord over in New Netherland. “They were the arbiters of fashion, the Court of last Appeal and they knew it, and bowed to their fate” (99). In a perfectly republican manner, the van der Luydens do not desire power for personal gain but rather bow to “some remote ancestral authority which fate compelled them to wield” (98). Mrs. Archer is therefore correct in telling her son that Old New York is not an aristocracy: its leaders may be high-born but they do not want to usurp the place of power; rather, they dispassionately accept that their lineage, wealth, and education have made them the most capable of making decisions for the good of the community. Thus, after conferences with his wife, Henry makes rulings on behalf of Old New York with his “bloodless hand weighed down by the Patroon’s great signet-ring” (126).

Though Henry van der Luyden is still its leader, New York is in a state of transition from property and family to credit as the determinant of power, as Beaufort’s tumultuous social career illustrates: he is run out of town after rash financial speculation fails to save his

²⁹ See Wilentz 27-28, 76.

bank, but Lefferts correctly predicts that “we shall see our children . . . marrying Beaufort’s bastards” (322).³⁰ This narrative follows the transformation that historian Sven Beckert has traced within the leadership of New York’s economic elite from just before the Civil War to the turn of the century. The city’s early mercantile elite, Beckert shows, adopted republican ideals like civic virtue, prudence, thrift, good manners, self-education, and family networks not only to explain but to secure their wealth and status. Mrs. Archer suggests as much in her full explanation for why New York is not an aristocracy: “Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were just respectable English or Dutch merchants, who came to the colonies to make their fortune, and stayed here because they did so well” (92). The Archers’ place in the pyramid was determined by the early economic success of their ancestors, which provided future generations with enough wealth and property to inculcate good education, manners, and taste in seeming perpetuity. Wharton’s first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), argues that families of means should also teach their children to appreciate fine art from a young age, as “the feeling for beauty needs as careful cultivation as the other civic virtues” (174).

Given that Wharton’s pyramid is borrowed from a waterworks project, it is tempting to suggest that the refined taste and worldly ways of the economic elite trickle down to the rest of society, nourishing the common good. Dell Upton claims that the general sentiment surrounding the opening of the Croton Reservoir in 1842 “articulated a characteristically republican vision of New York society, but one that was rapidly fading by the time the Croton Waterworks opened. At its heart was the seductive image of a diverse population acting freely but as though animated by a single will” (11). By the twentieth century the Reservoir was gone and, Beckert shows, New York’s leaders, now bankers and industrialists,

³⁰ Archer’s son is engaged to Beaufort’s daughter at novel’s end.

embraced liberal individualism, practiced conspicuous consumption, and consolidated themselves as the “bourgeoisie” against their increasingly class-conscious workers.³¹

At its own pace, New York follows a much larger sociopolitical trajectory whereby liberal-capitalist individualism and the gradual expansion of suffrage eroded the republican hegemony of the Revolutionary period.³² After the publication of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in 1835, it was more common to speak of the U.S. as a democracy³³ or, more pointedly, a liberal democracy. “In the aftermath of the Civil War,” James Kloppenberg writes, “republican echoes continued to reverberate” but “[t]he rise of laissez-faire liberalism made references to civic virtue or the public good, conceived as something separate from individual interest, seem quaint if not irrelevant” (*Virtues* 66). In the American tradition, republicanism was used to secure the economic and political hegemony of white land-owning men and the exclusion of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and others. From this point of view, “republicanism appears to be a celebration of hierarchy, patriarchy, and militarism” (*Virtues* 61).³⁴ Archer comes to understand a highly local version of this truth, which in Wharton’s hands becomes symptomatic critique. Old New York’s “republican distinctions” are exposed, by both Wharton as archeological analyst and Archer as skeptical citizen, as patriarchal rituals aimed at oppressing and silencing women, specifically around the issue of sexual freedom and equality (Wharton, *Age* 127).

“In reality,” Wharton writes, reproducing Archer’s thought, “they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only

³¹ See Beckert 20-42. Wharton’s New York novels set in that later time frame—*The House of Mirth* (1905), *Custom of the Country* (1913) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927)—portray liberal individualism in the guise of several representative characters (Lily Bart and Gus Trenor in *Mirth*; Undine Spragg and Elmer Mofatt in *Custom*; and Pauline Manford and Lita Wyant in *Twilight*).

³² See Mouffe, *Return* 24-25 for an overview of such arguments by J.G.A Pocock and Gordon Wood.

³³ See Kloppenberg, *Toward* 614.

³⁴ Kloppenberg does believe that there are “strands” of this tradition worth salvaging, particularly its connection to Protestant Christianity in the U.S. context. See *Virtues* 62-70.

represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (*Age* 90). Ellen’s desire for a divorce threatens these arbitrary distinctions: “The case of Countess Olenska had stirred up old settled convictions and set them drifting dangerously through [Archer’s] mind. His own exclamation: ‘Women should be free—as free as we are,’ struck to the root of a problem that it was agreed in his world to regard as non-existent” (89). Archer here instigates what we have called the transformation of antagonism into agonism. In other words, the conversation where Archer first makes this surprising “exclamation” comes closest to an argument about one of the catchwords of democracy (freedom) and its lack of application to women, briefly allowing Archer to expose the hierarchical marriage rituals as oppressive and hence antagonistic.

As in Cahan’s *Yekl*, the agon centers on divorce. At dinner with Jackson, his mother, and his sister, Archer expresses a “hope” that Ellen will get a divorce: “The word had fallen like a bombshell in the pure and tranquil atmosphere of the Archer dining-room” (87). Once he throws the “bomb” of agonistic discussion, Archer himself realizes “the bad taste of discussing such intimate matters in public” and moves to another subject until he can take up Ellen’s case privately with Jackson over cigars (87): “Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn’t? I’m sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots” (88). This is where the argument stops: Archer is “too irritated to measure the terrific consequences” of what he has said and Jackson replies that Count Olenski does not seem interested in taking “his wife back” (88). We should recall Howells: “good society, which always hates a scene, instinctively does its best to ignore inequality” (“Equality” 64). Old New York, of all the urban communities we have studied, “hates a scene” the most: disagreements represent the violence of their own patriarchal society bubbling to the surface, unsettling their hard-earned tranquility.

Instead of containing antagonism through agonism, as with other novelists, Wharton shows the degree to which even these momentary outbursts are themselves already signifiers of male privilege. To begin with, the men and women are segregated before the former resume the argument: “After dinner, according to immemorial custom, Mrs. Archer and [Archer’s sister] trailed their long silk draperies up to the drawing-room . . . while the gentlemen smoked below stairs” (*Age* 87). The smoking room is more private than the “public” dining room (87), but here the men take up the private, as in personal, issue of a woman’s sexual freedom within the public, as in political, space of rational male deliberation. By taking up the issue of women’s personal freedom in the context of a male debate, Archer realizes later, he and Jackson participate in a time-honored charade:

“Nice” women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men like himself were therefore—in the heat of argument—the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. Such verbal generousities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern. (89)

Men make all sorts of empty claims about women’s freedom, which do nothing more than make the men feel better and effect no change whatsoever. The “root of the problem” runs deeper (93): to say “women should be as free as we are” is to say that they should be equal (as free *as*). Archer senses that the repressed idea of women’s (sexual) equality, if brought into the open, would antagonize Old New York’s hierarchical worldview. For now, Archer goes through the motions while Wharton uses his skepticism to critique the arbitrary suppression of women. Again we see why symptomatic reading does “side politics”: all it can do is expose the violence of the police order; it inaugurates no change in and of itself.³⁵

Politics begins when a marginalized voice and/or body upsets a hierarchical regime by acting out, and thus confirming, the logic of equality. To flesh out Rancière’s theory of

³⁵ See Rancière, *Aesthetic Unconscious* 38.

politics, I will provide a relevant historical example. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony voted in New York, citing her status as a citizen since the Fourteenth Amendment prevented states from interfering with the voting rights of citizens. She was convicted for illegal voting and an 1875 Supreme Court ruling specified that women did not have a right to vote, which held until the Nineteenth Amendment almost fifty years later.³⁶ By voting in 1872, Anthony showed that all citizens have the right to take part in the ruling of the community, stymieing the “relentless privatization of public life” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 57). *Age*’s setting—1870s New York, the time and place of Anthony’s radical act—and publication date—1920, the year (white) women³⁷ won the right to vote in the U.S.—signal that the issue of women’s suffrage should not be far from any claim that there is a radical-democratic politics to the novel.

Yet Wharton and Goldman, to return to the pairing with which we began, were both opposed to women’s suffrage, though for slightly different reasons. For Goldman, emancipation should not be thought of as identical to the development of representative political systems. Emancipation is an act of self-realization for a woman, first “by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right to anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them; by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc., by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer” (56-57). “Only that,” she concludes “and not the ballot, will set woman free, will make her a force hitherto unknown in the world, a force for real love, for peace, for harmony” (57).³⁸ Goldman believed that class antagonism would need to be eliminated before even her own utopian state of pure love could come into existence.³⁹

³⁶ See Gordon v.

³⁷ Black women, for example, did not have full voting rights until 1965.

³⁸ The essay I quote from here is “Woman Suffrage” from 1910. See Goldman 45-57.

³⁹ Economic considerations are at the center of Goldman’s critique of Susan B. Anthony. See Goldman 54.

Wharton, for her part, “agreed [with the Woman Movement] that the position of women in American society was the crucial issue of the new century; [but] she did not believe that change was occurring. In her opinion the American woman was far from being a new or whole human being” (Ammons 3). This points to the conception of social antagonism that we have been working with in this study: “Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself” (Laclau and Mouffe 111). Here it is not only marriage or class strife, but an entire hierarchical distribution of the sensible that blocks women from achieving “full positivity,” particularly around issues of sex and desire (111). (Wharton and Goldman suggest that men suffer from the marriage relation as well, only much less.) The arbitrariness of the rituals of oppression and hence of society itself—“society, if it can be said to exist,” Archer puts it—make antagonism thinkable (Wharton, *Age* 259). However, Wharton imagined no clear path for the emancipation of women across the world, neither through the ballot nor through socioeconomic change. Furthermore, Wharton questioned the essentialist assumption behind the idea of self-realization as a force of love: subtracting herself from the hierarchical identities she has occupied (daughter, wife, mother), woman does not then return to her “natural” biological identity, as Goldman implies; rather, she must invent a new identity, a new sense of self and community, which may be difficult if not impossible in a hierarchical distribution of the sensible that has a place for everybody.

We have already shown that Ellen is the force of anti-utopian realism dampening Archer’s vision of a “world” where they will be free to be themselves—just “two human beings who love each other,” i.e. radical equals qua humans who express their feelings openly (285). Archer, Pamela Knights notes, “still assumes that somewhere a ‘real’ self survives. The suggestion of the unfolding narrative is, more radically, that without the shape, the social mold, there may be no self at all” (21). Archer imagines a world existing beyond or

outside the hierarchical pairing of married man and his mistress, but as Ellen warns him there is no such place, no such identity. The minute they act on their love, they will be given a place in New York's cosmopolitan imagination (they will be foreign lovers, elopers, etc.).

Ellen tells Archer that their love is not simply improbable but is *founded on* impossibility:

there's no *us* in that sense! We're near each other only if we stay far from each other . . . Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them. (Wharton, *Age* 285)

Contra Goldman, radical action seems permanently blocked, both because the utopia will never arrive and because, in the here-and-now, even though one's "social role" is constrictive, "declassification is a loss of being" (Knights 35). Radical action, in the form of dis-identification, would be "a form of death," a becoming-ghost (36). Do not be fooled: ghosts exist. "The melancholy possibility of having to 'kill time'," for example, "was a vision that haunted [Mrs. Welland] as the spectre of the unemployed haunts the philanthropists" (Wharton, *Age* 232). The distinction is between accounting for time and letting it slip by. In the parallel case, the unemployed are counted as an object of the philanthropist's charity but the specter of the unemployed is an excessive number beyond the count of those he can possibly help—the "part with no part," in other words. "Here rises up the ghost of what lies beyond the furthest boundaries of the Family's territory: the persistent depressions of the 1870s and the thousands of homeless on the streets of New York" (Knights 25).

On the edges of self and society, then, we find the forgotten and the nameless, i.e., those whose spectral existence threatens the imagined self-sufficiency of the police order. This is a radical reframing of antagonism: those who have been oppressed, forgotten, or silenced call the hierarchical totality into question by announcing their right to be counted as full human beings and hence equals. Knights argues that Wharton's characters can only experience "a different kind of self (one, impossibly, beyond the social)" in the imagination,

which requires a different mode of writing for Wharton, where “the mimetic mode of realism” becomes “the terrain of fantasy” (35). Fantasy does not have to be separate from reality; taken into the realm of aesthetics, as in Wharton’s “Terminus,” it can disorient and rearrange our sense of self and our sense of reality.⁴⁰

Knights turns to the moments when “Archer’s perception is radically disarranged” and the novel’s perfectly curated set pieces and controlled stylistic irony become warped in space and time trying to relate his fantasies (37). Dissensus occurs in moments when Ellen and Archer steal time alone but know “their minutes [are] numbered” or “fe[el] the pressure of the minutes” (Wharton, *Age* 187, 300). The only escape is to go outside of time, it seems. For example, when Archer sees Ellen while visiting the van der Luydens’ Patroon house, its colonial setting suggests “that Archer and Ellen can go back, escape from their history and begin again” (Knights 37). The generic mode is historical fantasy: “The homely little house stood there, its panels and brasses shining in the firelight, as if magically created to receive them” (Wharton, *Age* 161). Another example is when Archer picks up Ellen from a New Jersey train station. Picturing their trek back to Manhattan, he glimpses the future:

he remembered that there were people who thought there would one day be a tunnel under the Hudson through which the trains of the Pennsylvania railway would run straight into New York. They were of the brotherhood of visionaries who likewise predicted the building of ships that would cross the Atlantic in five days, the invention of a flying machine, lighting by electricity, telephonic communication without wires, and other Arabian Night marvels.

“I don’t care which of their visions comes true,” Archer mused, “as long as the tunnel isn’t built yet.” In his senseless school-boy happiness he pictured Madame Olenska’s descent from the train, his discovery of her a long way off, among the throngs of meaningless faces, her clinging to his arm as he guided her to the carriage, their slow approach to the wharf among the slipping horses, laden carts, vociferating teamsters, and then the startling quiet of the ferry-boat, where they would sit side by side under the snow, in the motionless carriage, while the earth seemed to glide away under them, rolling to the other side of the sun. (280)

⁴⁰ See Rancière, *Dissensus* 141.

We can name this mutual disarrangement of character and genre, which clearly affects the reader as well, a form of anarchic anachronism within the context of archeological realism. Given Mrs. Welland's attempt to scatter the specters of excess time by planning every minute of the day; given Wharton's realist emphasis on historical accuracy; given the novel's fast-forwarding in the last chapter, with its implied but misleading narrative of progress; given the novel's publication in the year of women's suffrage, with its own implied but misleading narrative of progress; given such aesthetic and political emphases on time surrounding the novel, a radical mode of being and writing would have to be one that is anachronistic. An anachronistic aesthetic and political identity falls aslant of at least three dominant modes of measuring time: Old New York's method of occupying all moments of the day (the characters' sense of time); the archeologist's method of placing all people and objects in the proper time and place (the writer's sense of time); and our sociopolitical progress from the oppressive time-place expertly recreated by the author/expert (the reader's sense of time). Anachronism is of a piece with the formal and political "anarchy" of modernism (Wharton, *Writing* 14). Being anachronistic shows that one can do anything in and by writing—at the sweep of the pen, 1870s New York becomes a colonial fantasy or an "Arabian Night" portrayal of the future (Wharton, *Age* 280). Instead of becoming a new rule of form, Wharton's anachronisms occur in small but significant moments that break from the aesthetic and political constraints of her expert archeological re-creation of Old New York. This momentary concession to modernism via anachronism gives Wharton and her characters the opportunity to express, on the level of form and content, what Archer implies in his utopian plea—that his and Ellen's love outstrips and invalidates the expansive categories for illicit love in Old New York—while also recognizing Ellen's skepticism: such love is impossible to act on, or else it would not be what it is.

The Patroon house is not the most instructive example of anarchic anachronism, if only because the fantasy exists only in Archer's mind. We are looking for a staging of the fantasy of being outside time. Archer's image of New York's future is anachronistic to the degree that the fantasy has become reality for the reader. What gets lost in this fantasy-as-future is clear: Archer imagines recognizing Ellen "among the throngs of meaningless faces" and, on the ferry, "among the slipping horses, laden carts, vociferating teamsters" (280). Like Howells's Lapham, Archer picks out his loved one from the anonymous, faceless crowd of the ferry. Even though Archer refuses to participate in the narrative of civic progress, since he wants this journey to be slow, he also refuses to recognize not just the anonymous ("meaningless faces") but also the possibility of their collective organization ("teamsters").

In chapter XXXI, however, Wharton does something more radical. She jumps from between Washington Square and Fifty-Seventh Street in the 1870s to the Met in Central Park, which, as we have noted already, did not exist at this location until 1880 (this is something Wharton would have known: she had family on the Board of Trustees). Instead of being a historical fantasy or the imagination of a now-realized future, Wharton gives her characters an impossible time-place to express the impossibility of their love. The Met enacts an antagonistic redistribution of the sensible on three levels: setting, character, and author's voice. First, the Met's Central Park location and the objects housed there upset New York's understanding of the right place, the right crowd, and the right kinds of art for a viewing. Inspired in part by the objects he and Ellen find in the museum, Archer is able to see their love made visible in the world like a piece of art. Since their love will eventually—or, given the impossible setting, has already—banish(ed) Ellen from New York, the feeling bodied forth into the museum anachronistically speaks back from the edges of society, challenging New York's conception of love as much as art. Like Wharton in "Terminus," these lovers on

the edge of the world identify with the ghosts of time. Finally, Wharton is inspired by both the setting and her characters to challenge her readers' expectations of the kinds of bodies, voices, and situations that can be registered in an archeological account of an era.

III. The Met and Anachronism: Setting, Character, Style

After the eighteenth century, artistic works were no longer viewed by aristocrats in private holdings and were made available to the public in the modern museum. This change, Rancière notes, coincided with the French Revolution, when the Louvre became filled “with princely portraits and pious paintings looted by the revolutionary armies from Italian palaces or Dutch museums” (*Aisthesis* x). In other words, the dawn of the modern museum coincided with the democratic revolution. Works of art were stripped of their original context and thus “the hierarchies of genres tended to vanish, and the works, separated from their hierarchical destinations, were increasingly perceived as expressions of the collective grandeur of the people and of their collective patrimony” (“Aesthetics and Politics” 291). More simply, anonymous spectators now stood before grand pieces of art and made what they would of them—a terrifying idea, for some. “Over time,” however, “the new institution created a certain form of policy of the institution, more or less putting lay people out of the museum to have them reenter through educational programs” (293).

The Met restaged this aesthetic revolution in 1880 by moving from a converted mansion on West Fourteenth Street, the heart of Old New York, to an unfinished building in Central Park. Winifred Howe's 1914 history of the museum notes “that the trustees, notwithstanding the emphasis they placed on the educational side of Museum work, apparently made no attempt to arrange the pictures according to schools” (190). Despite a desire to educate and hence refine the populace, the space of the Met made it impossible by upsetting the hierarchical system of genres with a confusing jumble of pictures and artifacts

(see fig. 5). Divorced from their context and from their schools/genres, there was no prescribed way for art in the Met to speak to patrons. This was radical insofar as the museum's lease stipulated that it be free four days of the week, making it a public institution.

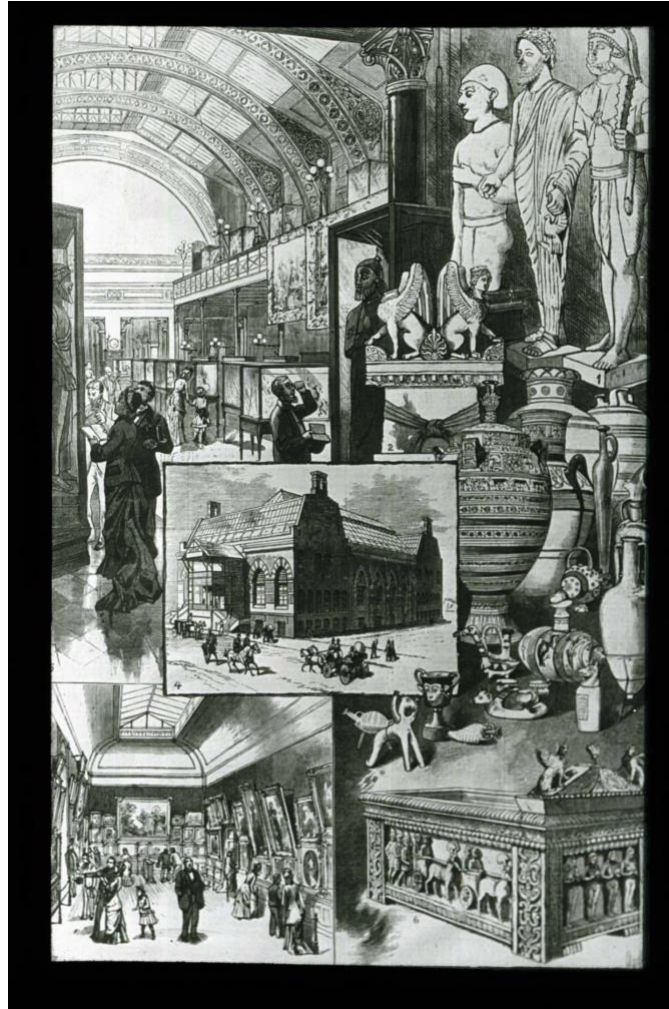


Figure 5: "The First Building in Central Park (Details)"
Source: W. Howe, p. 191.

As Kassanoff points out, Wharton "deplored the movement to make galleries more democratically accessible" (155). What she deplored most was the educational function of the museum, which sought to teach people how to view art.⁴¹ Rancière would agree: to

⁴¹ See Roffman 209-210.

describe art to the masses is to talk down to them instead of letting the work exist on its own for each and every person. This tension is staged when Wharton has her characters avoid the Wolfe collection, which contained high art with “anecdotic” labels, and instead seek out the Cesnola antiquities, comprising archaeological artifacts from ancient Cyprus (*Age* 299). Looking at these objects, Ellen remarks: “It seems cruel that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: ‘Use unknown’” (300). The uncertain use of the Cypriot artifacts speaks to both the aesthetic power and the political limitations of the art museum. For Rancière, “museum works are art . . . because they were nothing like that for those who made them. And reciprocally, these works come to us as the product of a collective life, but on the condition of keeping us away from it” (*Aisthesis* 19). Ellen tries to imagine the Cypriots using these objects but notes the loss of meaning across time. This points to the fine line separating art and politics: though they both reconfigure the sensible world, Rancière explains, “[t]his does not mean that the museum creates a new kind of collective popular appropriation. Rather, it creates the possibility of new forms of perception that can also be implemented in the relation of people to their lived experience” (“Aesthetics” 295). This is what happens in the novel: the aesthetic evocation of a “forgotten people” yields a new way of seeing, feeling, and moving about the world that will link Ellen, Archer, and the Cypriots (Wharton, *Age* 300).

As they are about to part, Archer looks at Ellen and “felt that he had never before beheld love visible” (303). The shock to Archer’s perceptual system signals a new distribution of the sensible. To understand how, we need first to distinguish this mute recognition of love from New York’s facility for nonverbal communication. Archer has spent most of his adult life interpreting the mute signs and symptoms of well-practiced faces

to communicate about something unpleasant like an affair, the mechanisms of which are of anthropological value for Wharton. Once an affair is subtly referenced, society polices the parties unequally: the man receives looks but the woman is treated as a “criminal” (132). In the museum, however, Archer is struck dumb by the visibility and brute obviousness of Ellen’s love: *this* is love. More simply, Archer is shocked to see a previously repressed feeling visible in the world. The shock is similar to the one Anna Leath experiences in *The Reef* and has the same political significance: “she discerned for the first time instincts and desires, which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of mutiny” (Wharton, *Reef* 290). Unlike Anna Leath, though, this is not an intrapersonal but an interpersonal revolution.⁴²

Ellen’s love is bodied forth into the world as a confirmation of equality, an indifference to difference, signaled by the lack of a possessive pronoun (it is not “her love”). Rancière is fond of a line cut from the final version of *Madame Bovary*, which speaks to this kind of love: “[Rodolphe] understood nothing of that voracious love which throws itself upon things at random . . . plunging entire into the being which is loved, taking possession of his sentiments . . . and almost reaching the proportions of a pure Idea through amplitude and impersonality” (qtd. in *Mute Speech* 119). We can compare this to Sharon Cameron’s “impersonality,” which “disrupts elementary categories we suppose to be fundamental to specifying human distinctiveness” (ix). Such is the mode of Wharton’s “Terminus,” which also never made it to print, showing how radical these ideas of love are: “the common-place room of the inn / With its dull impersonal furniture, kindled a mystic flame” and tears Wharton from her previous identity, facilitating her identification with the “nameless.”

⁴² An implication of this reading might be that Ellen’s body is aestheticized for Archer’s individual viewing pleasure, a tendency Emily Orlando has located in Wharton’s male protagonists (see Orlando 170-200); but here, on the contrary, the expressions of love shocks the two characters out of their familiar identities.

Of course, the lovers in “Terminus” have acted on their desires, unlike Ellen and Archer, who never consummate their relationship, even though society assumes they have and Ellen is thereafter ritualistically banished. Their love, in other words, is the thing that New York will eventually silence in its typically unequal fashion, which Archer belatedly realizes at Ellen’s going-away party not long after the museum rendezvous:

And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to “foreign” vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer’s natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin. (Wharton, *Age* 319)

In chapter XXXI, Ellen’s expression of love is anachronistically polemical: it exposes the impersonal, equalizing nature of love before *and* after New York silences her as Archer’s mistress (this moment comes before Ellen is banished in terms of the plot but after her silencing in terms of the historical possibility of visiting the Met’s Central Park location).

When Ellen makes love visible in the untimely act of planning their affair, Wharton equates her and Archer not only with other lovers but the nameless many forgotten in and by time. Like love, time is indifferent to difference: “after a while nothing matters.” Perhaps this is why Archer and Ellen keep hearing ghostly footsteps all around them: “The step drew nearer, and a guardian in a braided cap walked listlessly through the room like a ghost stalking through a necropolis” (301). We can compare this simile to an earlier one: “The melancholy possibility of having to ‘kill time’ . . . was a vision that haunted [Mrs. Welland] as the spectre of the unemployed haunts the philanthropists” (232). In the museum, Ellen and Archer are killing time and expressing emotions outside of Old New York’s distribution of the sensible: *they* are like spectral remainders. When he returns home, Archer makes this

identification clear: “he looked about at the familiar objects in the hall as if he viewed them from the other side of the grave. . . . He sat there without conscious thoughts . . . in a deep and grave amazement that seemed to suspend life rather than quicken it” (303).

The spectral imagery—specifically the metaphorical relationship between her characters and death/ghosts—signals that Wharton is writing in a different mode to show the antagonistic emergence of forces unseen and unheard in archeological realism. Bentley argues that Wharton *rescues* her brand of realism with the modern museum. Faced with the onslaught of modernity, museums and Wharton’s realism alike took to collecting priceless fragments and placing them under the broad social-scientific category of “culture.” Indeed, the Met marks the transition from the 1870s to the twentieth century in the last chapter:

[Archer] had just got back from a big official reception for the inauguration of the new galleries at the Metropolitan Museum, and the spectacle of those great spaces crowded with the spoils of the ages, where the throng of fashion circulated through a series of scientifically catalogued treasures, had suddenly pressed on a rusted spring of memory.

“Why, this used to be one of the old Cesnola rooms,” he heard some one say; and instantly everything about him vanished, and he was sitting alone on a hard leather divan against a radiator, while a slight figure in a long sealskin coat moved away down the meagerly-fitted vista of the old Museum. (Wharton, *Age* 326)

In the new century, it is fashionable to visit the Museum. However, there is something radically different between this space of culture (“scientifically catalogued treasures”) and the untimely (for Ellen/Archer) and anachronistic (for Wharton/her readers) visit to the museum in the 1870s.⁴³ The return to the museum in the last chapter shows the return to archeological realism. As Archer’s memory of Ellen walking away illustrates, however, the original, anachronistic museum is populated by ghosts of time, including Ellen and Archer.

⁴³ Kassanoff points out that the Cesnola antiquities were deemed to be fakes—altered and touched up at best, created for the exhibit at worst (158-160). By setting the scene amongst possible fakes, Kassanoff reasons, Wharton lets go of her own fantasy for a historically “innocent” origin for democracy in America (162).

We can understand the distinction between the two museum sequences through the paradox of mute speech. This phrase takes its cue from the archaeological novel, where every object equally tells the story of a time. The problem is that the author-as-expert does all the talking. The revolutionary employment of mute speech brings bodies and objects onto the stage without speaking for them, instead letting their muteness resonate. The Cesnola antiquities accomplish this in the absence of archeological knowledge: their use being unknown, the Cypriots emerge from and recede back into the senseless march of time. Mimicking this movement in her writing, Wharton has Ellen and Archer stop talking as the ghostly museum attendant walks by; and “when [he] had vanished down a vista of mummies and sarcophagi Archer spoke again” (301). An anonymous body lumbers onto and then exits the stage, silently telling a story that Wharton’s characters and readers identify with thanks to Ellen and the Cypriots: in the *longue durée*, we will all be forgotten.

The ghostly image of Ellen walking away, spurred by the reference to the Cesnola collection in the twentieth-century incarnation of the Met, parallels the way Ellen once recalled the forgotten Cypriots. Just as Ellen makes love visible after viewing the artifacts, Wharton’s readers may be inspired by Ellen and Archer’s redistribution of the sensible once it becomes a relic of the past. The novel was serialized in the *Pictorial Review* alongside editorials like “Does Your Husband Really Love You?” and “Tell Us What You Really Think About Marriage” (qtd. in Thornton). Wharton reconceives love as something disruptive to the institution of marriage by being open to anyone. In relation to the Nineteenth Amendment, the novel warns against any assumption that democracy has finally arrived, encouraging readers instead to see oppression where it persists and to look for democracy in moments when a forgotten population announces its presence in the name of equality.

Chapter 5

“A Catalogue of Wrong and Outrage”:

Undermining White Supremacist Discourse and Spatial Practice in *The Marrow of Tradition*

In *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Charles W. Chesnutt represents the events leading up to the November 10, 1898, riot in Wilmington, the largest city in North Carolina at the time and the home of one of the busiest ports along the Southern Atlantic Coast.¹ Two days after an election won by the white supremacist arm of the Democratic party thanks to ballot stuffing and voter intimidation, a mob of armed whites shot black citizens on the streets of Wilmington. The city’s white elite then staged a coup, forcing the resignation of local Republican leaders and the expulsion of influential black citizens. Chesnutt’s novel, set in “Wellington,” charts the buildup of racial antagonism in the city—race difference constructed as an us-versus-them relation, where “they” threaten “our” way of life—until “The Storm Breaks,” as the title of chapter XXXII describes it (164).

The Marrow of Tradition contains four interwoven plots. First, there is a political plot involving the white supremacist editor Major Carteret, who uses his newspaper (the *Morning Chronicle*) to launch a campaign to restore the city to white Democratic rule. There is a genealogical plot involving Carteret’s wife, Olivia, and her black half-sister and near-twin Janet Miller. In a related professional plot, Janet’s husband, Dr. William Miller, returns from an extensive education to set up a black hospital in Wellington. Finally, there is a courtship plot involving a dissolute aristocrat, Tom Delamere, and an upstanding young man, Ellis, who are both fighting for the hand of Carteret’s sister, Clara Pemberton. The last plot takes

¹ Wilmington had a population of 20,056 in 1890 (census records). The next largest cities were Charlotte (11,557) and Asheville (10,235). By the 1900 census Wilmington’s population stayed about the same (20,966) but was still the largest city in the state. On the importance of the city as a regional hub, see Prather 17.

a dark turn when Tom murders his aunt in blackface, framing his father's servant Sandy, who is nearly lynched for the crime. The rest of the plots come together during Chesnutt's rendering of the Wilmington massacre. Carteret realizes that his inflammatory rhetoric has created a monster beyond his control and he returns home in disgust to find his only son suffering from an unrelated medical emergency. Major Carteret must ask Miller for assistance but Miller refuses, revealing that his son was killed in the riot. Olivia heads to the Miller household as a last resort, and Miller leaves the choice to his wife, who shows mercy.

Ever since W.D. Howells deemed it "bitter, bitter," *The Marrow of Tradition* has been dogged by the question of genre ("Psychological" 882). While the depiction of the riot is realistic, there are other elements that would seem to push the novel outside the boundaries of realism. Howells hits on one in his review: Chesnutt's novel is unflinching in its account of racial violence. Howells comes off as a Northern liberal who is blind to the realities of the Jim Crow South, begging the question: would Chesnutt even want to be associated with this "tradition"? Chesnutt also changes the name of the city and alters historical facts (his riot is *before* the election), something a card-carrying realist might not do. Joseph McElrath and Andrew Hebard claim that Chesnutt's rendering of the Wilmington "revolution" owes more to the Southern chivalric romance or the historical romance than it does to realism.² Other critics have highlighted the melodramatic, gothic, and epic elements of *Marrow's* plots.³

My overarching claim, however, will be that *Marrow* is the realist novel *par excellence*. Citing Laclau and Mouffe, Kenneth Warren has shown that American literary realism began as an attempt to spread "democratic struggles" to new areas of civil society via the representation of everyday life (13), which carried an important "promise": "as realism

² See Hebard; and McElrath, "Why Charles W. Chesnutt is Not a Realist."

³ On melodrama and *Marrow*, see Wilson 142-144; on the gothic, see Ianovici; on the epic, see Rutledge.

secured a position as the dominant aesthetic in the nation's most prestigious magazines the unfinished business of black political liberation would emerge from the relative oblivion that had enveloped it following the abandonment of Radical Reconstruction" (50). However, the realists' "conflation of aesthetics and politics" as well as "the insistence of writers like Henry James on seeing the political in terms of its social manifestations" unintentionally abetted the contemporaneous defense of Jim Crow segregation, since it stoked fears of undifferentiated social spaces (50, 14). Chesnutt, I claim, merges aesthetics and politics, social and political equality in realist fashion, but also plays up the distinctions between white supremacist ideology and the original "promise" of American literary realism. *Marrow* marks a return to the beginning for realism that is also a decisive step forward, aesthetically and politically.

A key to Chesnutt's political and representational method in *Marrow* can be found in his description of the start of the massacre in chapter XXXII of the novel:

[A]t three o'clock every passing colored man was ordered, by the first white man he met, to throw up his hands. If he complied, he was searched, more or less roughly, for firearms, and then warned to get off the street. When he met another group of white men the scene was repeated. . . . If he resisted any demand of those who halted him—But the records of the day are historical; they may be found in the newspapers of the following date, but they are more firmly engraved upon the hearts and memories of the people of Wellington. (164)

Chesnutt stops in his tracks when he approaches the historical record, pivoting to the ground-level experiences of "the people of Wellington." Chesnutt interviewed victims of the Wilmington massacre and based numerous characters on real people. For example, the unifying element of Chesnutt's depiction of events—Miller's ride across the city in search of his wife and child—is "based on the riot experiences of Dr. Thomas Mask, the third African American doctor to practice in Wilmington" (McKoy 55). Josh Green, who implores Miller to join his party of armed men, is a composite of those who resisted that day.⁴

⁴ See Yarborough 238; and McKoy 69.

According to the logic of Chesnutt's sentence, the ground-level account would appear to complement the historical record. However, there are few agreed-upon facts about either the start of the riot (who shot first/when) or the number of black lives lost (estimates range from six to sixty). Furthermore, the circulation of white supremacist discourse helped shape the unfolding of the massacre itself and the local/national response. Chesnutt is not working *with* historical facts but working *against* the discursive spin found in local and national papers. Ryan Simmons argues that Chesnutt's realism "demands a deep awareness that 'reality' is both negotiated and rooted in discourse, and it requires an experimental attempt to reorient readers' reception of language in order to do its work" (4). "The murder of African Americans on the city streets," he clarifies, "is both a bodily and a textual act, a killing but also a spectacle and a warning to others. Chesnutt attempts to reclaim the symbolism of this violence in the interests of African Americans' rights" (91). We can put a finer point on this by looking at the moment Simmons has in mind: "The negroes seemed to have been killed, as the band plays in circus parades, at the street intersections, where the example would be most effective" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 171-172). Miller knows "what it signified" (a warning not to resist the pogrom) because of the white supremacists' deliberate arrangement of bodies in urban space (171). Representing the Wilmington riot realistically, Chesnutt realized, meant confronting the entwining of white supremacist discourse (newspapers, speeches, fiction, Jim Crow laws, symbolic warnings) and spatial practice (segregation, paramilitary marches, street violence, the arrangement of bodies).

The version of events peddled by local newspapers run by the white Democrats leading the statewide white supremacy campaign—Thomas Clawson's *Wilmington Daily Messenger*, the model for Carteret and his paper, and Josephus Daniels's Raleigh *News and Observer*—went something like this: Radical Reconstruction (1868-1877) and a recent run of

Republican victories (1894-1897) had given an undue amount of economic and political clout to North Carolina's large black population, all in the name of greater democracy (voting power for black men, removal of local voting restrictions, equal protection before the law, and free schools).⁵ The relatively large, black-majority city of Wilmington (11,324 blacks to 8,731 whites) helped a Republican/Populist bloc virtually sweep the state and local elections of 1894-1897, placing some black men in positions of political power, including members of Wilmington's Board of Aldermen.⁶ When John Campbell Dancy, a black man, was appointed by President McKinley as customs collector for Wilmington's busy port, he was promptly labeled the "Sambo of the Custom House" in local papers.⁷ Black entrepreneurs and artisans had also achieved a high degree of economic success in the city after the Civil War—earned, the white supremacist argument ran, at the expense of skilled white laborers and business leaders, though poverty and job insecurity were daily realities for many African Americans. Those who took menial jobs were accused of stealing them from unskilled white laborers, with the exception of the largely-female population of domestics (in Chesnutt's *Marrow*, a member of the city's black professional class supposes that "the white folks . . . favored [black domestic servants] because they had once belonged to them") (29).⁸

White Democrats returned to political power across North Carolina after the 1898 elections but, in their minds, Wilmington was still under "Negro Domination"—a catch-all phrase for black political, economic, and sexual power. As Leslie Hossfield has shown, Wilmington's white supremacist politicians, namely Alfred Moore Waddell (who may have

⁵ See Prather 34.

⁶ The "Fusion" ticket of 1894 and 1896 combined Republican and Populist interests in a powerful bloc meant to offset Democratic hegemony at the state and local level. Fusionists dominated the 1896 ticket and a white Republican, Daniel L. Russel of Wilmington, became governor. Prather writes that "[e]xactly how many blacks held office under Fusion rule has never been determined. An often repeated claim was that there were at least a thousand Negro office-holders in the state after the complete Fusion victory in 1896" (35).

⁷ See Sundquist 414.

⁸ On Wilmington's labor force, see Prather 27; and Honey 174-175.

been distantly related to Chesnutt),⁹ compared themselves to “Confederate and Revolutionary War heroes” (32). They argued that the gains made by the black population after the Civil War had oppressed the country’s rightful democratic subjects, landed white men. As Michael Honey explains, white supremacist leaders also called on Social Darwinist logic to cement their case for there being “too much democracy” in Wilmington (170): “In the view of white business elites, the exercise of power at the ballot box or in the halls of government by African Americans and lower-class whites violated the natural order” (165).

Wilmington’s white supremacist leaders drafted a “White Declaration of Independence” the day before the massacre, in which the signatories “declare[d] that [they] will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin.”¹⁰ One of the articles stipulated that the editor of Wilmington’s black-run daily newspaper, Alexander Manly, be banished from the city along with his printing press. In August, Manly’s *Daily Record* had printed an editorial, written by Manly himself, that white supremacists argued “slandered” white women by suggesting that they might consent to a sexual relationship with a black man, a point Manly originally made to show that the specter of the black rapist was an imaginary justification for lynching.¹¹ Before the election, this editorial had been widely republished with outraged commentaries; now Waddell’s group singled out Manly as a unique threat to the law and order of their white-controlled city.

After reading the Declaration to an assembly of the city’s black leaders, Waddell demanded a response the next morning. When the time passed without a response, due to a

⁹ See Sundquist 418.

¹⁰ The Declaration is reproduced in the Norton Critical Edition of *Marrow* (276-278).

¹¹ See McKoy 43-46; and Sundquist 410-411.

miscommunication,¹² Waddell walked to the armory of the Wilmington Light Infantry, where he was met by “a crowd of about 500 men” representing “a cross section of the town, including large numbers of professionals and clergy” (1898 Wilmington Riot Commission 123). The crowd marched toward the *Daily Record*, armed with Winchester rifles and a large horse-drawn machinegun. In Waddell’s account, published in *Collier’s Weekly*, the riot was an unfortunate result of the black community leaders failing to respond to their demands. The political *coup*, which saw Waddell named the new mayor, is described as the legal assumption of power by Democrats after the outgoing government lost control of the city.¹³

White supremacist leaders still had to explain the fact that the escalation to violence only came after the paramilitary crowd ransacked and set fire to the temporary home of the *Daily Record*: Love and Charity Hall, affiliated with the adjacent St. Luke’s Church. Waddell insisted that the “we” only meant to destroy Manly’s press and quickly put out the fire. He neglected to say that the crowd fired on the all-black neighborhood fire crew as *they* doused the fire.¹⁴ As for those who spent a night in the forests and swamps outside the city, to Waddell this was a sign that the black population needed white protection: “I have sent messengers of both races out into the surrounding woods, where, it is said, fugitives are in hiding, begging the people to come back to their homes, and to rest assured they will be protected in their persons and property” (295).

¹² The Committee of Colored Citizens drafted a response and a representative placed it in the mail instead of hand-delivering it to Waddell’s home as planned because many armed whites stood guard in the neighborhood (1898 Wilmington Riot Commission 117). Waddell knew this but did not inform the crowd (124).

¹³ Waddell, Alfred Moore. “The Story of the Wilmington, N.C., Race Riots.” *Collier’s Weekly* (Nov. 26, 1898): 3-5. Reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Marrow* 293-297. I will cite this edition parenthetically.

¹⁴ See 1898 Wilmington Riot Commission 129.

National newspapers swallowed the white supremacist narrative of events hook, line, and sinker. The *Washington Post's* headline from November 11, 1898 read “Negro Rule Ended.” An editorial published a week later claims that, for years, the people of Wilmington

have been subjected to insult and indignity at the hands of the uppish negro. Our daughters and sisters have been slapped across the mouth in the open street by young negro bucks, when no white man was near; pulled from bicycles and jostled into the ditch; poked in the side with umbrellas by negro wenches; our mothers forced to walk in the ditch by negro women linking hands together and walking four or five abreast on the sidewalk; our taxes squandered; our jury boxes filled with negroes; our dead loved ones sat over by a Coroner’s jury composed of negroes, the Coroner himself a negro; ourselves and sometimes our women hauled up on a trumped-up charge, by a negro Constable, before a negro Magistrate, in a negro barber shop. All these things have we stood, because we loved law and order, because we hated riot and bloodshed. But when Manley [*sic*] attacked the honor of the fairest and purest womanhood that breathed, he overran the cup. Still loving law and order, they gave him twenty-four hours to remove himself and his property from the soil he had profaned. He made no move in that direction and at the expiration of the time the press upon which the vile slander was printed was broken to atoms and the plague-spot purged with fire. The negroes outnumbered the whites over two to one, became enraged, and, trusting in superior numbers, fired the first shot.¹⁵

Almost nothing in this editorial is true—not the trumped-up charge of violent street encounters; nor that Manly refused to leave town; nor that blacks fired first. The truths it contains—Wilmington had a black coroner, black police officers, and black lawyers—are twisted into the image of a white citizenry unlawfully gazed at, poked, and prodded by power-hungry blacks. The whites loved law and order so much that they put up with such behavior until the breaking-point (Manly’s article), after which they were needed to restore law and order with military force. The fact that the mob of heavily-armed whites kicked off the riot by destroying Love and Charity Hall becomes, incredibly, an act of divine vengeance.

A novel like *Marrow*, Chesnutt understood, had to undermine white supremacist discourse and spatial practice with a counter-hegemonic version of events in defense of

¹⁵ Green, Ernest M., “The Riot at Wilmington.” *Washington Post*, 22 November, 1898, p. 3. Reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Marrow*, 283-284.

black civil rights. If Chesnutt wanted to counter white supremacist lies with a more objective, realistic account, this would have been no easy task. The 1898 Wilmington Riot Commission confronted the problem of accuracy in their exhaustive *Final Report* (2006):

Because of the frantic nature of the story and the way in which it was reported at the time of the event—often with papers going to press while guns were fired in the streets—many inaccurate or incomplete accounts were circulated and survive today. Letters and other primary documents survive from witnesses and participants to add their personal experiences to printed versions of the day’s activities. Some who participated in the riot and later recalled the day in order to record the “rebellion” for posterity added through their memories many of the reporting inaccuracies. Confusion has arisen over the accuracy and truthfulness of participant records, contemporary newspaper articles, and similar data. Therefore, one must piece the day’s events together using multiple, often overlapping, information sources. (130)

Another option, for Chesnutt, would have been to embrace the subjective mode, matching personal accounts of the riot with an impassioned defense of black civil rights. This was the route taken by David Bryant Fulton in *Hanover; or the Persecution of the Lowly*, published under the pseudonym Jack Thorne in 1900. In contrast, Chesnutt spends most of *Marrow* inside the heads of white supremacist characters while also testing out various responses from the black community via the many secondary characters in the novel, any one of whom, it is imagined, might become a hero during the riot and point a way forward.

In a journal entry written years before (May 1880),¹⁶ Chesnutt intuited the aesthetic and political challenge he would face in approaching the novel this way:

the subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro, which is common to most Americans . . . cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate: so their position must be mined; and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it.

This work is of a twofold character. The negro’s part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea; and by while amusing them to ~~familiarize~~ lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step to the desired state of feeling. (*Journals* 140, alterations in original)

¹⁶ In a notable coincidence, this entry begins: “Susie [his wife] has been in Wilmington a month” (*Journals* 136).

Despite the very real anger he felt,¹⁷ Chesnutt does not attempt to “storm” the white supremacist version of events with a violent counter-example. He loses many sympathetic readers here since he seems to invalidate the black militant position represented by Green and accept the placid liberal progressivism of Miller.¹⁸ Indeed, his position is seemingly echoed by Miller when the latter gives his reason for not joining Green’s party: “Our time will come,—the time when we can command respect for our rights; but it is not yet in sight. Give it up, boys, and wait” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 169). While Chesnutt does step back from Green’s politics on account of its violence, which to him is the inverse of white supremacy, Miller is invalidated for the opposite reason: he naively believes that “the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time” (*Marrow* 43).

Following Stephen Knadler and others,¹⁹ I will argue that the secret hero of the novel is Miller’s wife, Janet, who only wants to be *recognized* by her white half-sister Olivia, the wife of Major Carteret. Although it is framed as a “weakness,” Janet’s desire for recognition is not born of naïveté: “She . . . appreciated to the full the social forces arrayed against any such recognition as she had dreamed of” (44). Janet is banished from Olivia’s life and mind because she looks exactly like her half-sister and thus threatens to expose the arbitrariness of the Carteret family’s sense of superiority over the Millers. If Olivia were to recognize Janet, in other words, it would challenge the socio-spatial system that makes one sister black and another white, with all the social and political inequities that follow. In the last moments of the novel, Olivia finally sees and hears Janet as she (Janet) describes the wrongs done unto

¹⁷ His daughter, Helen, later claimed that “he realized that [the novel] would antagonize a large part of the reading public, especially in the South, but he was by nature a crusader and was burning with anger” (H. Chesnutt 170).

¹⁸ See Yarborough 238.

¹⁹ See Knadler; Danielson; and Hamilton.

her and “the people of Wellington” (164). Here Chesnutt breaks through the construction of race antagonism in white supremacist discourse and spatial practice with a radical-democratic alternative. Since his method of countering white supremacy is at once discursive, spatial, and antagonistic, it must be distinguished from the white supremacist variety.

Jacques Rancière will help us isolate the radical-democratic valences of Janet’s final speech. Rancière’s work centers on the sudden appearance of a political being in a time and place that had been relegated to the apolitical private sphere, where only the noise of suffering can emerge but not actual speech. The “antagonistic” appearance of a new subject disrupts the hierarchical distribution of bodies, places, and functions that Rancière calls the police order (*Disagreement* 29). As we saw in the previous chapter, politics is aesthetic insofar as a once-excluded voice/body re-forms the dominant sense of what can be seen, heard, or felt by identifying with all those who have been left out of the dominant order. Once on the political stage, this new collectivity states the wrong behind their exclusion from sociopolitical life: it is wrong because all parties are equal.²⁰ Edith Wharton, we should clarify, never made it this far: she was more interested in the aesthetic and political act of identification with “the nameless, the many” than the declaration of wrongs (“Terminus”).

Rancière is equally well known for his ideas on the politics of literature, or the qualities that writing shares with political speech: they both stage an “intervention in the carving up of objects that form a common world, the subjects that people that world and the powers they have to see it, name it and act upon it” (*Politics* 7). Yet the politics of literature, unlike the aesthetics of politics, “does not give collective voice to the anonymous” (*Dissensus* 142). As we have seen, the democratic aspects of the realist novel are its indifference toward its subject matter/meaning (any subject/reading is as good as another) and its ability to

²⁰ See Rancière, *Disagreement* 23-24.

awaken our senses to the mute speech of objects or the swirl of atoms that make everything equal. Realism's democratic indifference and its dance with muteness open the door for Warren's thesis—that the entangling of aesthetics and politics in American realism unintentionally fueled arguments for segregation. Furthermore, as we saw in chapters 1 and 4, on Howells and Wharton, the innovations involved in making mute people/objects appear and be felt or heard as equals pushed American realism into the realm of modernism.

For Chesnutt, confronting a race riot in a politically-expedient way meant blunting the free-floating elements of realism, style fully as much as message.²¹ But this does not mean that he telegraphed the message to such an extent that he sacrificed aesthetic interest or the principles of his realism. A delicate balance had to be struck, as he claims in his journal: "it is the province of literature . . . to accustom the public mind to the idea [of 'social recognition and equality']; and . . . to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step to the desired state of feeling" (*Journals* 140). Janet's plotline is an extended meditation on what it would look, sound, or feel like to be recognized as an equal. For most of the novel Janet is banished not just from Olivia's life and mind but from the narrator's attentions as well. In practice, this means that Chesnutt confronts the issue of recognition from Olivia's point of view. This is deliberate. First, he says, the engaged artist must "mine" the opposition's mindset before they, or his readers, realize it. Abraham Cahan, we recall, accomplished a similar feat in *The Rise of David Levinsky*: he goes into the mind of his Social Darwinian main character before making a rebuttal via a strike organized by the unnamed *Jewish Daily Forward*, blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. This moment is subtle enough to miss, however. Chesnutt perfects the aesthetics and politics of realism by relating Janet's speech at the climax of *Marrow*, forcing his readers to confront the wrongs of slavery

²¹ See Simmons 87-112.

and segregation from the point of view of absolute human equality, as codified by the ever-evolving discourse of the democratic revolution.²²

The rest of the chapter will proceed as follows. First, we will show how Chesnutt “mines” white supremacist ideology to arrive at the riot’s underlying cause: the bubbling over of race antagonism brought on by the hysterical reaction to Wilmington’s visible black middle class. Second, I will argue that Chesnutt uses “the province of literature” to open a time-place for Olivia’s recognition of Janet, and through her black Wilmington/Wellington, as an equal, preparing readers “for social recognition and equality.” The novel touches all the bases of American literary realism along the way. Race antagonism, for Chesnutt, is directly tied to urban space and democratic discourse; it can be appropriated and re-defined by competing ideologies (white supremacy or radical democracy). At its best, antagonism yields agonistic debate, but only when the novel’s white characters see and hear the black middle class not as threats to their identities, but as human beings who have been deeply wronged.

I. Mining the Opposition

In “Rights and Duties” (1908), originally given as a speech in Washington, D.C., Chesnutt argues that signs of black economic and political success in the city incite a “latent” race antagonism in white onlookers:

With each step forward the Negro has aroused some latent antagonism. Once the colored people all lived in mostly alleys and low marshy places which white people avoided; when one of them would buy a house in a better locality, and he was touching the tender pocket nerve of his white neighbors, a new source of antagonism was developed. Once they were mostly glad to eat, at the white man’s back door, the leavings of the white man’s table. But when a dignified government official or a dapper department clerk or a daintily attired school teacher, with a dollar to spare, would enter a Washington restaurant to eat, in a public space amid agreeable surroundings, a palatable meal, the nerve of racial exclusiveness was

²² By framing absolute equality in terms of the history of liberal-democratic discourse, I aim to transcode Rancière into Laclau and Mouffe’s framework. Rancière frames human equality as the equal capacity for speech and intelligence. Chesnutt views equality similarly but frames the equal capacity of everyone and anyone within a language of liberal universalism, as we will see.

touched and a new source of antagonism developed. I need not multiply instances.
(*Essays* 252)

I suggest that, for Chesnutt, the undisguised race antagonism found in white supremacist discourse and spatial practice result from such “instances” of “latent antagonism” in mixed spaces being multiplied beyond what the white onlooker takes to be a breaking point (252).

Bryan Wagner has argued, in a similar vein, that the Wellington/Wilmington riot is the cumulative effect of an “inchoate anxiety” produced by the visibility of the black middle class in mixed urban spaces (“Charles” 326). “Chesnutt advances his critique of racial violence,” Wagner writes, “by highlighting the elaborate interface of race, class, and urban visibility” (312). White supremacist ideology is built upon a certain “way of seeing” (to use a phrase from chapter 2): blacks are meant to live on the margins (in Chesnutt’s terms: alleys, swamps); when they cross into white society, they are to show deference and humility, generally mimicking the master-slave relations of old (315). The economic, political, and spatial development of postbellum Wilmington, however, made this fantasy unsustainable:

In the years after Reconstruction, Wilmington became one of the most economically and geographically integrated cities in the South. . . . In these years, African Americans transformed the city’s demographics by purchasing homes and businesses in predominantly white neighborhoods. As the *Southern Workman* proudly announces, the new class of “colored citizens” rapidly “[moved] out of the lanes and alleys of Wilmington, N.C. . . . and into houses” that were scattered amongst those of their white neighbors. At the same time, many successful African American artisans and professionals moved into offices in prominent downtown locations along Market Street and in the Front Street Market. (313-314)²³

Chesnutt draws these realities into his portrait of Wellington, highlighting the resulting crisis in white supremacist thought and identity. For example, the white supremacist Captain McBane gives a speech that turns on the same kind of hysterical reaction to signs of black economic and political success that we found in the *Washington Post* editorial²⁴ quoted above:

²³ Wagner quotes “North Carolina Notes,” *Southern Workman*, 1 Jan. 1872, p. 2.

²⁴ Wagner turns up other newspapers “reporting” on sidewalk skirmishes (“Charles” 326-327).

A negro justice of the peace has opened an office on Market Street, and only yesterday summoned a white man to appear before him. Negro lawyers get most of the business in the criminal court. Last evening a group of young white ladies, going quietly along the street arm-in-arm, were forced off the sidewalk by a crowd of negro girls. Coming down the street just now, I saw a spectacle of social equality and negro domination that made my blood boil with indignation,—a white and black convict, chained together, crossing the city in charge of a negro officer! (*Marrow* 23-24)

McBane does “not express a conscious intention to overthrow the government. Rather, [he] express[es] an inchoate anxiety about the ‘spectacles of social equality’ that interrupt the process of white perception” (Wagner, “Charles” 326). The charge of “too much democracy” in the weeks leading up to the riot is thus mined by Chesnutt to get at its source (Honey 170): “an epistemological crisis that is simultaneously a crisis of white identity” brought on by the visibility of Wellington’s black middle class (Wagner, “Charles” 312). While he is right to call it an identity crisis, epistemology may not be the best name or category for the related disturbance in the white supremacist’s vision of the world. A better term and explanation is in Chesnutt’s “Rights and Duties”: the “latent antagonism” brought on when the outside world fails to support the socio-spatial norms Southern whites gleaned from antebellum culture, which white supremacist (and aligned) discourse tries to perpetuate in the post-Reconstruction world. For Laclau and Mouffe, too, antagonism marks an identity crisis at the limits of discourse: “If the subject is constructed through language . . . any putting into question of that order must necessarily constitute an identity crisis” (112, 113).

The strength of Wagner’s reading, though, is his sense that this crisis defines the New South, not just those who openly espouse white supremacist ideology. Wagner focuses on a carriage ride taken by Olivia Carteret and her Aunt Polly. A new building pops into view, which Polly assumes to be a reconstruction of an “old . . . mansion [that had been] burned during the war”; instead, Olivia tells her it is Miller’s “new colored hospital” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 79). Polly’s response—“[t]he world is upside down” (79)—encapsulates

the identity crisis brought on by the visibility of the black middle class in Wellington. Order is momentarily restored by the appearance of Sandy, Mr. Delamere's servant: "'There's Mr. Delamere's Sandy!' exclaimed [Olivia], touching her aunt on the arm. 'I wonder how his master is?' . . . Sandy, no less than his master, was survival of an interesting type. He had inherited the feudal deference for his superiors in position" (81).²⁵

The white supremacy campaign, Wagner argues, offers an opportunity to make the "real" city fit Polly and the New South's degraded, crisis-ridden ideology and thus restore damaged white Southern identity. But it is worth pausing here because Wagner hits on a central aspect of Chesnutt's construction of "Wellington" and its relationship to Wilmington. Wagner places Miller's hospital—which we later learn is surrounded by "a schoolhouse and a large church, both used by the colored people"—in Wilmington's Campbell Square (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 178). The historical square included two of the largest black churches in the city, First Baptist and St. Stephen's A.M.E.,²⁶ and a Peabody School. Since the square served as the center of black community life, "it is not surprising that it occupies the anxious center of the novel's political geography" (Wagner, "Charles" 316). Still, Chesnutt does not name the square, surrounding it with fictional streets: "'the Weldon Road . . . and . . . Pine Street'" (*Marrow* 79). Just as no map of Wilmington will show these roads there was no black hospital in Campbell Square, or anywhere else in the city.²⁷

²⁵ Chesnutt later provides a nuanced account of why Sandy would willingly play into the white supremacist vision of the world. After Tom Delamere murders Aunt Polly in blackface and frames his father's servant for the crime, Sandy misrecognizes himself in the racial caricature in the city streets, suggesting the degree to which white supremacist ideology has infected the Southern mind: "As it seemed to Sandy, he saw himself hurrying along in front of himself toward the house" (102).

²⁶ St. Stephen's A.M.E. is the likely model for Sandy's church, explaining his presence in the square. His congregation is "the largest in the city" and "to him was a social club as well as a religious temple" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 76). St Stephen's A.M.E. had one of the largest congregations *in the state* (Reaves 105).

²⁷ After the Civil War, the city attracted educated, well-trained black doctors like Miller but they "saw patients in their homes or offices . . . When hospitalization was needed, there was little choice but to care for the patient at home. Surgery was often performed in the bedroom, on the parlor floor, or kitchen table" (Reaves 319). James Walker Memorial Hospital replaced City Hospital in 1901, with a promise for "an annex for black

Chesnutt thus draws on the history of Wilmington to create his own socio-spatial novelistic construct, Wellington. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, “as far as the category of space itself is concerned, it cannot be assumed to preexist the text . . . but must be projected by the latter as that ‘code’ of space which the reader must learn to read” (*Raymond Chandler* 31). Since Chesnutt is mining the opposition, the “code” of space in this novel might be thought of as a white supremacist “distribution of the sensible,” to use Rancière’s phrase—an entire world divided into white and black spaces/roles. The lesson of the Polly-Olivia carriage ride, then, is that when white characters circulate through the city, they are shocked by the visibility of black bodies in what they have been taught to think of as white spaces.

Take, for example, Carteret’s “walk to the office”: “while passing the city hall . . . he had seen the steps of that noble building disfigured by a fringe of job-hunting negroes . . . like a string of buzzards sitting on a rail, awaiting their opportunity to batten upon the helpless corpse of a moribund city” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 22). We later learn that most of Chesnutt’s white characters live close to one another, about a half a mile from City Hall, and that one of Carteret’s employees, Ellis, likes to walk past the Carteret home on his way to this cluster of houses. If Carteret’s newspaper is located downtown, near the *Wilmington Messenger* (21 N. Front), then this places his home either on the eastern section of town, around 11th and Market (see fig. 6 in the next section, below), or the southwestern part of town (fig. 7).²⁸ Both are areas where white participants of the riot lived. While Wellington

citizens,” which took years to complete and opened in 1905. “[I]t was all the community had until 1920-21 when the first African-American hospital opened at 415 North Seventh Street” (220).

²⁸ Mr. Delamere lives “a short distance beyond” Ellis’s boarding house; but Ellis likes to walk home from the newspaper so that he passes the Carteret household (104). The walk straight to the boarding house is only “slightly shorter,” so the Carteret house is likely nearby, in that cluster of homes owned by white participants in the real-life riot (see fig. 6, below). The man Carteret is based on—Thomas Clawson—lived right next to the City Hall, a mere stone’s throw from the newspaper office; Carteret cannot live here, otherwise Ellis’s walk would *always* go by the Carterets. While Chesnutt based his newspaper on the *Messenger*, he chose to have his white characters clustered together in the mostly-white eastern portion of the city. It is also possible that the Carterets live in a southwestern cluster, around Third and Church. See fig. 7.

can be overlaid on the “real” city, what matters most is the interrelationship between characters and spaces, real and fictive. Carteret passes a real location, City Hall—by no means a white space, in actuality—and is shocked to see black job seekers, who become the future black middle class feeding on Wellington’s carcass.²⁹ Carteret then works through this threat to his identity in an editorial, eliminating the spectral presence altogether:

Taking for his theme the unfitness of the negro to participate in government,—an unfitness due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially to his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race,—the major had demonstrated, it seemed to him clearly enough, that the ballot in the hands of the negro was a menace to the commonwealth. He had argued, with entire conviction, that the white and black races could never attain social and political harmony by commingling in their blood; he had proved by several historical parallels that no two unassimilable races could ever live together except in the relation of superior and inferior . . . (*Marrow* 22)

Carteret’s editorial represents the *manifestation* of race antagonism in white supremacist discourse, which in turn leads to the riot. When the crowd later sets fire to Miller’s hospital, it is “the logical outcome of the crusade which the Morning Chronicle preached, in season and out of season, for many months” (182). White supremacist discourse and spatial practice thus exist in a feedback loop: the discourse draws the world into two unequal camps, which everyday urban life undermines with examples of bodies and spaces that do not fit the pattern; and the only perceived recourse is to either make them fit or destroy them.

The riot is not the only example of this feedback loop in action. *De facto* and *de jure* segregation also bespeak a desire to expel signs of black economic and political success from white vision to maintain an imagined black/white hierarchy. In *Marrow*, the Miller family represents black economic success and upward mobility—Miller’s father, a stevedore on the city’s port, bought the Carteret family home after the war, and the doctor’s family now lives

²⁹ Known as Thalian Hall, the building was both a city hall and a theater. Reaves notes that City Hall has gone unrecognized as a specifically black space, a fact that Carteret would seem to be repressing. “It was the most frequent venue for black entertainers and lecturers,” including Frederick Douglass (August 1, 1872) (46).

there—and it is no coincidence that they are the locus of white anxiety and *de facto/de jure* segregation. I want to focus on two scenes that show Chesnutt “mining” the white supremacist worldview for its reaction to the Millers more specifically: Miller’s journey into the city by train (chapter V) and Janet Miller’s buggy ride past Olivia’s house (chapter XI). These scenes will continue to teach us to read white supremacist spatial “codes” but they will also cause us to reevaluate Wagner’s claims. Once the Millers become the center of attention, we will notice that the identity “black middle class” is applied from the outside to explain the source of the anxiety they provoke; but, in the moment, they appear as vague threats.³⁰ Second, we will need to distinguish between Miller and Janet, with Janet best evoking the radical position Chesnutt sketched in his nonfiction writing on U.S. race relations.

“A Journey Southward” deals with the ground-level consequences of the recently-adjudicated *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). The sequence involves the last stages of Miller’s journey to Wellington from New York City, where Miller has just “purchase[d] equipment for his new hospital” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 34). Miller, in this sense, is like Chesnutt returning to the South “as a possible literary subject” after gleaning elements of his craft in “northern literary markets” (Brodhead 21). At the stop for Philadelphia Miller meets the glance of his old mentor, Dr. Burns, who happens to be traveling to Wellington to operate on Major Carteret’s son, who has swallowed a rattle. For the moment, they meet as equals, as colleagues, while Chesnutt’s narrator defamiliarizes any differences:

³⁰ The readings that follow line up more closely with Wagner’s later work. In *Disturbing the Peace* (2009), Wagner argues that blackness in America is not a fixed category traceable across time and place; rather it is a condition of statelessness produced by what he calls the “police power,” a pervasive system of judicial and extra-judicial codes (although he is only named in a single footnote, Rancière’s conception of the police is clearly in play here). “Seen from the standpoint of the police power,” Wagner writes, “blackness is imperceptible except for the presumed danger it poses to public welfare” (*Disturbing* 6-7). In the decades following the Civil War, “the ex-slave was portrayed, in the press and on the stump, as a threat to society” (7).

A celebrated traveler, after many years spent in barbarous or savage lands, has said that among all varieties of mankind the similarities are vastly more important and fundamental than the differences. Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking . . . for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states, as a “visible admixture” of African blood. (33)

Race is a social construct based on biological and/or physiological cues. It even varies by state how certain bodies are categorized. For Burns, this is all rather abstract and seemingly out of their control: “It is a great problem, Miller, the future of your race . . . It is a serial story which we are all reading, and which grows in vital interest with each successive installment” (34). Miller is optimistic, offering a statement drenched in dramatic irony: “If our race had made as much progress everywhere as they have in Wellington, the problem would be well on the way toward solution” (35). In this view, “race antagonism” in the South is a great, unfolding story of “slo[w],” “painfu[l]” progress (34-35).

Chesnutt then introduces his characters and his readers to the segregationist socio-spatial code of the South, which not only names Miller as “black” and Burns as “white” but also anxiously polices the boundary between them. “They were already far down in Virginia, and had stopped at a station beyond Richmond,” when the conductor asks everyone to please move to the day car, after which point he returns to speak with the two doctors (35):

“Excuse me, sir,” said the conductor, addressing Dr. Burns, “but did I understand you to say that this man was your servant?”

“No, indeed!” replied Dr. Burns indignantly. “The gentleman is not my servant, nor anybody’s servant, but is my friend. . . .”

“I’m sorry to part *friends*, but the law of Virginia does not permit colored passengers to ride in the white cars. . . .”

“I have paid my fare on the sleeping-car, where the separate-car law does not apply,” remonstrated Miller.

“I can’t help that. You can doubtless get your money back from the sleeping-car company. But this is a day coach, and is distinctly marked ‘White,’ as you must have seen before you sat down here. The sign is put there for that purpose.” (36)

Once the train conductor has identified Miller as a black person, the next step is to read his class.³¹ A black person can ride in a white car as a servant because it mimics master-slave relations. A black person who has “paid first-class fare” must be expelled to a car that is separate but certainly not equal (38): “It was an old car, with faded upholstery, from which the stuffing projected here and there through torn places” (37). Miller sums it up neatly: “As the traditional negro,—the servant,—he is welcomed; as an equal, he is repudiated” (40).

When the conductor confirms that Miller is not a servant but a middle-class black man, he asks him to leave the car. Burns pushes back, creating the first agonistic debate over democratic rights in the novel: “‘You shall not stir a step, Miller,’ exclaimed Burns wrathfully. ‘This is an outrage upon a citizen of a free country. You shall stay right here’” (36). Agonism, in Mouffe’s account, is a disagreement between adversaries who share the language of liberal-democratic rights, which, as a baseline, means recognizing the right to defend one’s views. The claim to Miller’s rights as a citizen is met by the conductor’s reference to “the law of Virginia,” which gives him broad power to identify Miller’s race and police his movement (36). Burns continues his fight: “my friend has his rights to maintain . . . There is a vital principle at stake in the matter” (36). Miller’s silence is deafening—a hint, confirmed by the rest of the novel, that agonism rarely travels across the color line, though there are fierce debates between white characters³² and between black characters.³³

The debate on the train ends when the conductor plays his trump card:

The law gives me the right to remove him by force. I can call on the train crew to assist me, or on the other passengers. If I should choose to put him off the train

³¹ Chesnutt was fascinated and horrified by the broad power of racial classification given to the Jim Crow conductors, and often quizzed them on how easy it was to identify a black person, the irony being that they often thought they were talking to a white man in the light-skinned Chesnutt. See Chesnutt, *Essays* 141.

³² See chapter XXV (pp. 125-129) and chapter XXVII (pp. 133-141). Mr. Delamere must convince Carteret, who then has to convince an agitated crowd, that Sandy should not be lynched for a crime he did not commit.

³³ See chapter XII (pp. 68-72.) The argument, here, is whether Miller or Green would “die to defend a right” (71). While Miller “[w]as willing to give up his life to a cause” (i.e., give his career to a cause), he cannot go as far as Green and propose that he “die for it” (71).

entirely, in the middle of the swamp, he would have no redress—the law so provides. If I did not wish to use force, I could simply switch this car off at the next siding, transfer the white passengers to another, and leave you and your friend in possession until you were arrested and fined or imprisoned. (37)

It turns out that Miller does not have the rights he has as a citizen of the country. This is because he has been deemed a threat to the white supremacist ideology behind Jim Crow segregation. That is, Miller's unwillingness to self-identify with the word "Colored" on the sign (38), and thereby enforce his own segregation, threatens the socio-spatial system founded by those signs and the bedrock difference they supposedly signify. He must either accept that hierarchical reality or be left "in the middle of the swamp."

The conductor's warning functions like the "conspicuous" signs, which suggest that if "a colored person [might] endeavor, for a moment, to lose sight of his disability, these staring signs would remind him continually that between him and the rest of mankind not of his own color, there was by law a great gulf fixed" (38). If Miller needs to be reminded that he is a threat, he will be expelled not just from the car but from the South's entire socio-spatial system. The conductor provides the key to the whole system: it is not internally self-sufficient but relies on an imagined outside ("the swamp," populated, we imagine, by other outlaws)³⁴ that threatens it but for the same reason gives it coherence. This is why Chesnut's white supremacists later riot: an internal threat disrupts their system of hierarchical differences and hence their sense of self, providing the impetus to expel that threat (to the swamps outside Wellington/Wilmington, no less) to "save" the system and themselves.

Miller chooses to ride in the "colored" car, as putting up a fight "would delay [Burns's] journey and imperil a life at the other end" (37). However, this scene of segregation effectively repeats itself in Wellington. Burns invites Miller to participate in the surgery but

³⁴ Wagner claims that, thanks to antebellum figures like Bras-Coupé, "the swamp becomes an archetypal wilderness, a wasteland, by virtue of its association with the outlaw" (*Disturbing* 71).

Carteret refuses to allow a black man in his home. Pressed by Burns, Carteret settles on the “personal” conflict between their wives as the reason Miller cannot come in (47). Accepting this, Burns dispatches a local doctor, Dr. Price, to let Miller know the decision. Miller waits on the back steps, symbolically on the margins with all black visitors, sans servants. As Price notes to himself, the threat Miller poses is that he is a “social misfit, an odd quantity, educated out of his own class, with no possible hope of entrance into that above it” (49).

The reference to Miller’s in-between position points back to the train sequence.

When he enters the “colored” car, he feels alienated from the class of people therein:

Toward evening the train drew up at a station where quite a party of farm laborers, fresh from their daily toil, swarmed out from the conspicuously labeled colored waiting-room, and into the car with Miller. They were a jolly, good-natured crowd, and, free from the embarrassing presence of white people, proceeded to enjoy themselves after their own fashion. Here an amorous fellow sat with his arm around a buxom girl’s waist. A musically inclined individual—his talents did not did not go far beyond inclination—produced a mouth-organ and struck up a tune, to which a limber-legged boy danced in the aisle. For a while Miller was amused. They were his people, and he felt a certain expansive warmth toward them in spite of their obvious shortcomings. By and by, however, the air became too close, and he went out upon the platform. For the sake of the democratic ideal, which meant so much to his race, he might have endured the affliction . . . but personally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train. Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon some more logical and considerate basis than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and, by the very nature of things, brutal drawing of a color line. (40-41)

Miller wishes to replace the “arbitrary” color line with a more substantial distinction based on class, which, Kenneth Warren argues, “differ[s] little from tactics of conservative Southerners in the immediate postwar period who sought to maintain their position atop the social order by” drawing upper-class African Americans into an alliance (79).³⁵ For Walter

³⁵ We will see an example of this alliance later, when Carteret and Miller form an unlikely connection in their desire to separate personal and political matters on the day of the riot.

Benn Michaels this moment encapsulates liberal antiracism's "monetarization of the technology of discrimination" (293).

The problem is that both critics associate this position with Chesnutt himself. In fact, Chesnutt had a different response to the same experience on the Southern railroad:

It was pleasant enough till we took on about fifty darkies who were going to Norfolk to work on a truck farm. They filled the seats and standing room, and sat in each other's laps for want of seats. As the day was warm and the people rather dirty, the odor may better be imagined than described [.] Although it was nothing to me, I could empathise with my fellow traveler, who stuck his head out of the window . . . It was a merry crowd however, especially one young fellow who would gravely line out a hymn and then sing it himself, with all the intonations of a camp meeting. (*Journals* 112)

Though he begins in the key of class discrimination, Chesnutt's feelings move in the opposite direction of Miller's, echoing the affective possibilities of the crowded train car in Howells, which is secured by the ear if not the nose. Chesnutt enjoys the hymn, as it reminds him of African American spirituals and hence the persistence of black culture in America.

We are left to wonder what position Miller inhabits if it is not the author's own. It is, in fact, what I have called the "naïve liberalism" of George Washington Cable. Indeed, in "The Freedman's Case in Equity" (1885), Cable advances the argument that the law of "equal accommodations" . . . at once reduced to half all opportunity for those more reasonable and mutually agreeable self-assortments which public assemblages and groups of passengers find it best to make in all other enlightened countries, making them on the score of conduct, dress, and price" (415). A more reasonable method of self-sorting is by class. This more substantial difference is founded on Cable's idea that, while we might one day achieve *political* equality, there will never be *social* equality. So, while we must fight for equal rights for African Americans, there is nothing one can or should do to prevent "natural" class differences from expressing themselves in private life (the train car, the office, the home). Chesnutt vehemently disagrees with this assumption: "We hear men speak of

different kinds of equality. They are willing to concede the Negro *this* kind of equality, but deny him *that* kind of equality. There is but one kind of equality, as there is but one kind of truth” (*Essays* 254).

In the train sequence, Chesnutt has not only demonstrated how the socio-spatial system of race hierarchy falters in the face of an excessive, unclassified element and requires mobilization on antagonistic (us/them) lines to correct; he has also tested out a response, which is to retreat to class difference to avoid race antagonism. Chesnutt adds yet a second possible response in this same sequence when Green emerges during a brief stop for water: “As the train came to a standstill, a huge negro, covered thickly with dust, crawled off one of the rear trucks unobserved” (*Marrow* 39). Miller notices in his face “a concentrated hatred almost uncanny in its murderousness” (39). Green has hitched a ride into Wellington determined to kill the white supremacist McBane for murdering his father and ruining his mother. He represents the return of the stateless Other that the white supremacist relies on to secure his personal and political identity (while Miller is an internal threat that would be made to occupy that stateless space if he fails to self-segregate). But to Chesnutt, Green’s “concentrated hatred” is the inverse of white supremacy (39).³⁶ Indeed, he later mobilizes in an us-versus-them defensive position amidst the outbreak of race antagonism in Wellington.

If Chesnutt does not fully embrace a uniquely black (political) identity in either the Miller or Green plotlines this is because he wants to combine autonomy with equality, the particular with the universal. Equality goes all the way or it goes nowhere, he argues in “Rights and Duties,” leveraging liberalism’s starting point—absolute human equality and the equal capacity of everyone—for radical-democratic ends. Liberal democracy, as a political system, may have started with the assumption of equality but political philosophers

³⁶ See Knadler 442 for a similar argument.

immediately made qualifications: equality before the law but not in the office or the home; equality for some but not for others.³⁷ “We cannot classify equality as we do eggs—eggs, fresh eggs, strictly fresh eggs. It means an equal chance for every man” (Chesnutt, *Essays* 254). Nor should we categorize humans like eggs: “men [should look] upon one another as man upon man and [not] black and white” (253). Cable shows that the foundation of Southern ideology is the arbitrary designation of the slave as “alien” (410); if so, the remedy is not to retreat to the more justifiable difference of class or to arm oneself against the whites but to demand the black “race” be seen and heard as human beings *because* they are equals. Chesnutt pits a universalist argument against the hierarchical logic of Jim Crow to highlight and overturn the unfair exclusion of a particular group—really a set of voices and bodies marked as Other—from liberal democracy’s foundational promises for “every man.”

I will argue that Olivia’s recognition of Janet accomplishes this feat at the end of *Marrow*. To understand how this works, we first need to understand the nature of the sisters’ relationship, as captured in chapter XI (“The Baby and the Bird”). As with “The Journey Southward,” this chapter will teach us to read the “code” of space in the Southern city while preparing us to recognize its revolutionary overturning during the riot.

In this short chapter, Carteret’s sister Clara holds his child, Theodore (“Dodie”), close to an open window because the baby delights in the sound of a bird, while Olivia and Mammy Jane, the family nurse, look on. “So absorbed were the three women in the baby and the bird that neither one of them observed a neat top buggy, drawn by a sleek sorrel pony, passing slowly along the street before the house. In the buggy was seated” Janet and her child. Olivia, “chancing to lower her eyes for an instant, caught the other woman’s look directed toward her and her child. With a glance of cold aversion she turned away from the

³⁷ See Chambers 26-27.

window” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 66). Down on the street, meanwhile, Janet is “stung by Mrs. Carteret’s look,—the nearest approach she had ever made to a recognition of her sister’s existence” (67). In the interim, Janet’s child notices that Dodie has “slipped from Clara’s arms” and Janet screams out at the last moment so that the baby is caught (67).

All Janet wants in life is “a kind word, a nod, a smile [from Olivia], the least thing that imagination might have twisted into a recognition of the tie between them,” but when Olivia briefly meets Janet’s look at the window, giving the barest register of her existence, Olivia “felt a violent wave of antipathy sweep over her toward this baseborn sister who had thus thrust herself beneath her eyes” (43, 67). The “thrust” of Janet into Olivia’s field of vision makes her lose sight of Dodie; thus, in her mind, recognition threatens her family. She therefore tries to avoid all contact with her sister, though this proves difficult in a small city: “Never, while this woman lived in the town, would she be able to throw the veil of forgetfulness over this blot upon her father’s memory” (158).

Again, “black middle class” works in a pinch to describe the source of the identity crisis brought on by the sight of Janet in the streets of Wellington. As Janet passes the house, Mammy Jane says to herself: “Fo’ty yeahs ago ‘who’d ’a’ ever expected ter see a nigger gal ridin’ in her own buggy?” (67). But this is not the sole source of Olivia’s anxiety. There is also the issue of their physical likeness, which Mammy Jane explained earlier: “Dis yer Janet, w’at’s Mis’ ’Livy’s half-sister, is ez much like her ez ef dey wuz twins. Folks sometimes takes ’em fer one ernudder,—I s’pose it tickles Janet mos’ ter death, but it do make Mis’ ’Livy rippin” (9). Here, Chesnutt evokes a pervasive stereotype of the “mulatto” as a threat, which can be traced back to the urban “passing” novel and the tragic mulatto genre.

In his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), James Weldon Johnson gives the definitive account of the successful mulatto passing as white in the city. While in Eric

Sundquist's words "Johnson would exploit the nation's anxiety about the invisible mulatto population . . . [t]he theme . . . was already a common property of literature when Chesnutt came to it" (393-394). Chesnutt plays on the theme in interesting ways. For instance, Wellington is small enough that Janet cannot be anonymous like the ex-colored man in New York. But this is Olivia's fear: a citizen might misrecognize Olivia in Janet or vice versa.

Hortense Spillers has given a penetrating structural analysis of the tragic mulatto trope by unveiling the historical violence embedded in the signifier "mulatto/a":

Created to provide a middle ground of latitude between "black" and "white," the customary permissible binary agencies of the national adventure, mulatto being, as a neither/nor proposition, inscribed no historic locus, or materiality, that was other than evasive and shadowy on the national landscape. To that extent, the mulatto/a embodied an alibi, an excuse for "other/otherness" that the dominant culture could not (cannot now either) appropriate, or wish away. An accretion of signs that embody the "unspeakable," of the Everything that the dominant culture would forget, the mulatto/a, as term, designates a disguise, covers up, in the century of Emancipation and beyond, the social and political reality of the dreaded African presence. Behind the African-become-American stands the shadow, the unsubstantial "double" that the culture dreamed *in the place of* that humanity transformed into its profoundest challenge and by the impositions of policy, its deepest "un-American" activity. (165-166).

An unfixed identity—it is neither/nor—the mulatto both exposes and obscures "the national adventure" founded on "the false opposition of cultural traits that converge on the binary distribution of 'black' and 'white'" (166). Perhaps the "tragic mulatto/a" became a popular image in the nineteenth century³⁸ because it contained this threat by literally killing her off. This ideological containment strategy would thus be of a piece with race "science" suggesting that mulattos were a degenerate species bound to pass out of the gene pool, as well as the South's anti-miscegenation laws meant to make this deluded dream a reality.³⁹

³⁸ Spillers begins her analysis by noting that "the thematic of the 'tragic mulatto/a' seems to disappear at the end of the nineteenth century" (165).

³⁹ See Fredrickson 218-219, 234-235.

In “The Future American” (1901), a controversial series of articles for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Chesnutt argued the opposite point: in the future, we will *all* be mulattoes, and the white/black distinction will fall by the wayside. “Any dream of a pure white race, of the Anglo-Saxon type, for the United States, may as well be abandoned as impossible, even if desirable” (*Essays* 123). Lest we think Chesnutt walks into the opposite trap—the naïve liberal dream of a post-racial society—his point needs to be taken as a provocation, as in “Rights and Duties” but calling on the opposite temporal register: the future, or what Derrida calls the “democracy to come,” instead of the state of equality “before” society.⁴⁰ In the face of a white supremacist argument for the weeding out of mixed-raced people, and thus a hardening of the black/white hierarchy, Chesnutt claims that the American identity “to come” will be a hybrid one, unlocking absolute human equality because race will cease to be a category of identification.⁴¹ But the indistinction between white and black in the body of the Future American is a provocation meant to antagonize *current* anti-miscegenation laws.

A truly radical antagonistic event, then, would be the sudden appearance of the Future American in a socio-spatial system founded on race hierarchy. This would collapse into the here-and-now two time-places typically seen as outside or excessive to modern political society: the foundation of liberalism in the state of nature “before” society and the dream of a democracy “to come.” This is the promise Janet symbolizes, though for the same reason she enters the text as a threat. Janet was born and raised in her father’s house after Olivia’s mother died. Janet’s mother “had a easy time; she had a black gal ter wait on her, a buggy to ride in, an’ eve’ything she wanted” (8). But when Janet’s father dies unexpectedly,

⁴⁰ For Rancière’s critique of this concept, see *Dissensus* 45-61 and “Should Democracy Come?” Rancière argues that Derrida does not make room for democracy in practice—it is always “to come”—which Chesnutt gets around by having his Future American suddenly appear in flesh and blood in his novel. See below.

⁴¹ See Knadler 438.

they are expelled from the home by Aunt Polly, who had been raising Olivia in the interim. The young Janet is then sent to a “mission school” up north (9). Now that she’s returned to Wellington as the wife of Miller, Janet threatens to expose their father’s “shocking *mésalliance*” to everyone and anyone (162). Like the Future American, equality is written on her body, not as the presence of two races but as the absence of any difference between her and Olivia. Janet also has a child before Olivia, who had trouble bearing children before Dodie (and he is sickly, at that), sowing doubt into the supremacy of Anglo-Saxon stock.

If Janet is a threat for these reasons, she must be expelled from view. Olivia’s “veil of forgetfulness” is met with a related method suggested by Mammy Jane: “Might [Janet] not have cast the evil eye upon the baby and sought thereby to draw him out of the window? . . . By the same reasoning, the mockingbird might have been a familiar of the witch, and the two might have conspired to lure the infant to destruction” (68). Olivia later finds a charm hidden in Dodie’s crib, placed there by Mammy Jane to ward off evil spirits, and seems to accept this theory: “To remove it would give unnecessary pain to the old nurse. Of course these old negro superstitions were absurd,—but if the charm did no good, it would at least do no harm” (68). This renders white supremacy a species of “negro superstition” while pulling the Mammy trope into the defense of white supremacy. By turning Janet into a “witch,” Olivia and Mammy Jane name and contain the threat to the hierarchy on which they both rely. As a witch, in other words, Janet is neither fully human nor fully non-human, confirming that she is a threat *because* she is an unfixed identity.

While Miller ultimately acquiesces to this hierarchy while wishing that a more substantial difference will one day overtake it, Janet is effectively banished from the white supremacist socio-spatial system. Indeed, in a novel filled with tense dialogues about the political situation in Wellington, Janet is never seen interacting with anybody but her

husband. In this way, her plotline embodies the problem alluded to above, where characters rarely cross the color line in agonistic dialogue. She also returns us to the question of genre. Chesnutt imbues Janet's plot with elements of the gothic (doubling, the supernatural, the multigenerational home), the "passing" novel (metaphorized as the witch who "passes" as human), and the tragic mulatta genre to show how literature can be complicit in segregationist practices. This would appear to include the "conjure tales" Chesnutt wrote before *Marrow*. Indeed, he suggests that his own literary recovery of antebellum folk magic works alongside other generic elements and spatial practices (namely segregation) to contain the threat of blackness by expelling it from view, sending it to the past, to another world, or to the grave.⁴² Contra Warren, Chesnutt wants to make sure his realism stays off this list.

Olivia's recognition of Janet's existence promises the return of realism to this plot: it means ceasing to view her sister as a supernatural threat and at least acknowledging her day-to-day existence. Indeed, during the time that Janet is banished as a threat, Olivia is forced to work through the consequences of recognizing her sister's existence. She uncovers documents, suppressed by her Aunt Polly, stating that their father legally married Janet's mother in the brief time this was allowed during Reconstruction—when "[t]he air was full of liberty, and equal rights"—and left a small portion of his estate to Janet (156). She decides to burn the will, a decision that comes back to haunt her:

⁴² Chesnutt subtly acknowledges this point in his 1901 essay "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South." He first places conjure tales in the past, historical and personal: "During a recent visit to North Carolina . . . I took occasion to inquire into the latter-day prevalence of the old-time belief in what was known as 'conjuraton' or 'goopher,' my childish recollection of which I have elsewhere embodied in a number of stories" (155). He then subtly links the superstition behind these tales with Jim Crow segregation: "It is a condition of all witch stories that there must in some way be contact, either with the person or with some object intended to represent the person to be affected; or, if not actual contact, at least close proximity. The charm is placed under the door-sill, or buried under the hearth, or hidden in the mattress of the person to be conjured . . . It may [also] be . . . a line drawn across a road or path, which line it is fatal for a certain man or woman to cross. I heard of a case of a laboring man who went two miles out of his way, every morning and evening, while going to and from his work, to avoid such a line drawn for him by a certain powerful enemy" (*Essays* 156-157).

The will she had burned gave this sister of hers—she shuddered at the word—but a small part of the estate. Under the law, which intervened now that there was no will, the property should have been equally divided. If the woman had been white,—but the woman had *not* been white, and the same rule of moral conduct did not, *could* not, in the very nature of things, apply, as between white people! For, if this were not so, slavery had been, not merely an economic mistake, but a great crime against humanity. If it had been such a crime, as for a moment she dimly perceived it might have been, then through the long centuries there had been piled up a catalogue of wrong and outrage which, if the law of compensation be a law of nature, must some time, somewhere, in some way, be atoned for. (159)

Olivia realizes that slavery was founded on the idea of a “natural” inequality between the white and black races; but once her initial desire to see their father’s property divided unequally comes to feel arbitrary, not to say criminal, so does slavery. In other words, slavery might have been a “moral” crime, which presupposes an injury done to a fellow human being, rather than a just system giving the subjected place to the “naturally” inferior race. Newland Archer confronts a similar logical pitfall in Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*: he comes to believe that “women ought to be free—as free as we are,” but subconsciously realizes that, if women were “as free as we are,” they would be equal (88). What it would mean for Olivia to act on the realization that black people can be morally wronged is an open question, as it is for Archer until the anachronistic visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is equally an open question what Janet would accept as recognition. Would a confession about the will count? Chesnutt gives us no assurances. In fact, Janet is openly critical of her own desire for recognition, which implies that the black community requires some form of recognition from the white community to justify its existence: “So strong was this weakness that she had been angry with herself for her lack of pride, or even of a decent self-respect. It was, she sometimes thought, the heritage of her mother’s race, and she was ashamed of it as part of the taint of slavery” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 44).

Between Olivia and Janet’s musings, Chesnutt seems to be testing and invalidating certain forms of recognition (legal, familial, racial) without positing a positive example. This

is because recognition requires something that is repressed by the South's socio-spatial codes: not just face-to-face contact but also an agonistic conversation across the color line. Olivia intuits that the recognition of Janet would come in the form of "a catalogue of wrong and outrage," which she imagines being delivered by Janet in a moment of triumph, foreshadowing the last scene. At this point, though, Olivia could neither see nor hear such a speech. Chesnutt clarifies why and how this is possible when Olivia's husband, Carteret, responds to the novel's version of Manly's editorial: "To meet words with words upon such a subject would be to acknowledge the equality of the negro and his right to discuss or criticise the conduct of the white people" (148). If the human being, per Aristotle, is a political animal capable of speech, then agonism requires interlocutors to acknowledge an equal—an opponent, to be sure, but a fellow speaking being who has the right to a critical opinion. Mouffe does not adequately consider the socio-spatial barriers preventing certain voices and bodies from being acknowledged as an adversary. For Rancière, the recognition of a human voice/body as a political being is not given. Politics is a struggle over what a human being looks and sounds like, adjudicated by the statement of a fundamental wrong—that of being left out of the political, which is to say human, community—by a once-excluded voice/body.⁴³ Similarly, for Olivia to recognize Janet and confront the "catalogue of wrong and outrage," she must acknowledge a fellow human being—an equal (160).

Olivia's recognition of Janet as a human (i.e., verbal) being comes in the last scene of the novel. This marks the movement between the two parts of Chesnutt's representational project. The first part is to mine the inner workings of the white supremacist mindset, which we've shown to be a lesson in the New South's socio-spatial "codes" and why/what happens

⁴³ See Rancière, *Disagreement* 21-23.

when they are threatened. The final chapters find Chesnutt working with Janet to “prepare [for] social recognition and equality” (Chesnutt, *Journals* 140).

II. The Wellington Riot

The massacre takes up *Marrow*’s final four chapters. Chesnutt begins his representation of the riot on the margins of the city, with a “black voice” speaking back from the “swamps” about white violence (*Marrow* 166). Once we enter the city, the novel’s representational energies diverge. The first three riot chapters focus on Miller, with Green and others intersecting his trajectory at various points. Then, Chesnutt turns the representation over to Green’s armed defense, which takes him down to “the cotton compress” (170),⁴⁴ then up into the black neighborhood, and finally to Miller’s hospital in Campbell Square, where Green briefly intersects with Carteret when the mob sets fire to Miller’s hospital. From there we follow Carteret home. The novel ends with Carteret and then Olivia running over to the Miller household to beg the doctor to save Dodie. See fig. 6 and fig. 7 for two possible visual representations of these trajectories, based on some likely real-world locations. The best way to analyze the riot is to follow the trajectories leading to the final encounter at the Miller home, as they all build on each other.

Let’s begin with Miller’s trajectory. His itinerary “was suggested by a vivid description given [to Chesnutt] by Dr. Mask, during a visit of his to Cleveland, of the events of the riot and a ride which he took across the city during its progress” (Chesnutt qtd. in McKoy 56). We can establish the likely location of Miller’s home based on Dr. Mask’s home at 510 South Seventh Street. While by no means definite, this at least provides an anchor point for his movements, many of which will confirm his location on the relatively well-off south side of the city, a few blocks from homes owned by the white supremacist characters.

⁴⁴ This is a reference to Sprunt’s Cotton Compress on Front Street in Wilmington, along the water.

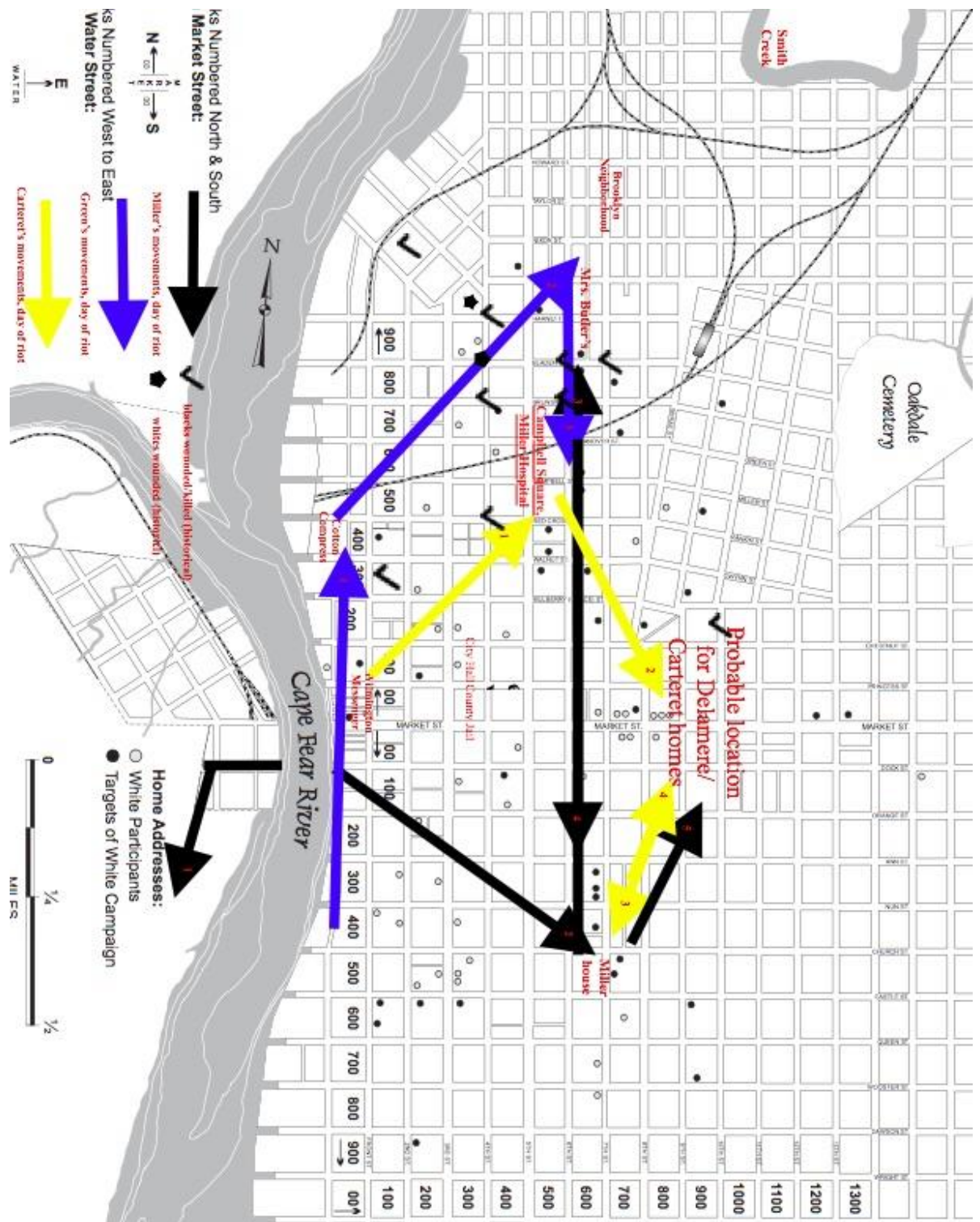


Figure 6: “Homes of Key Participants” (Edited I)
 Source: 1898 Wilmington Riot Commission, Chapter 4.

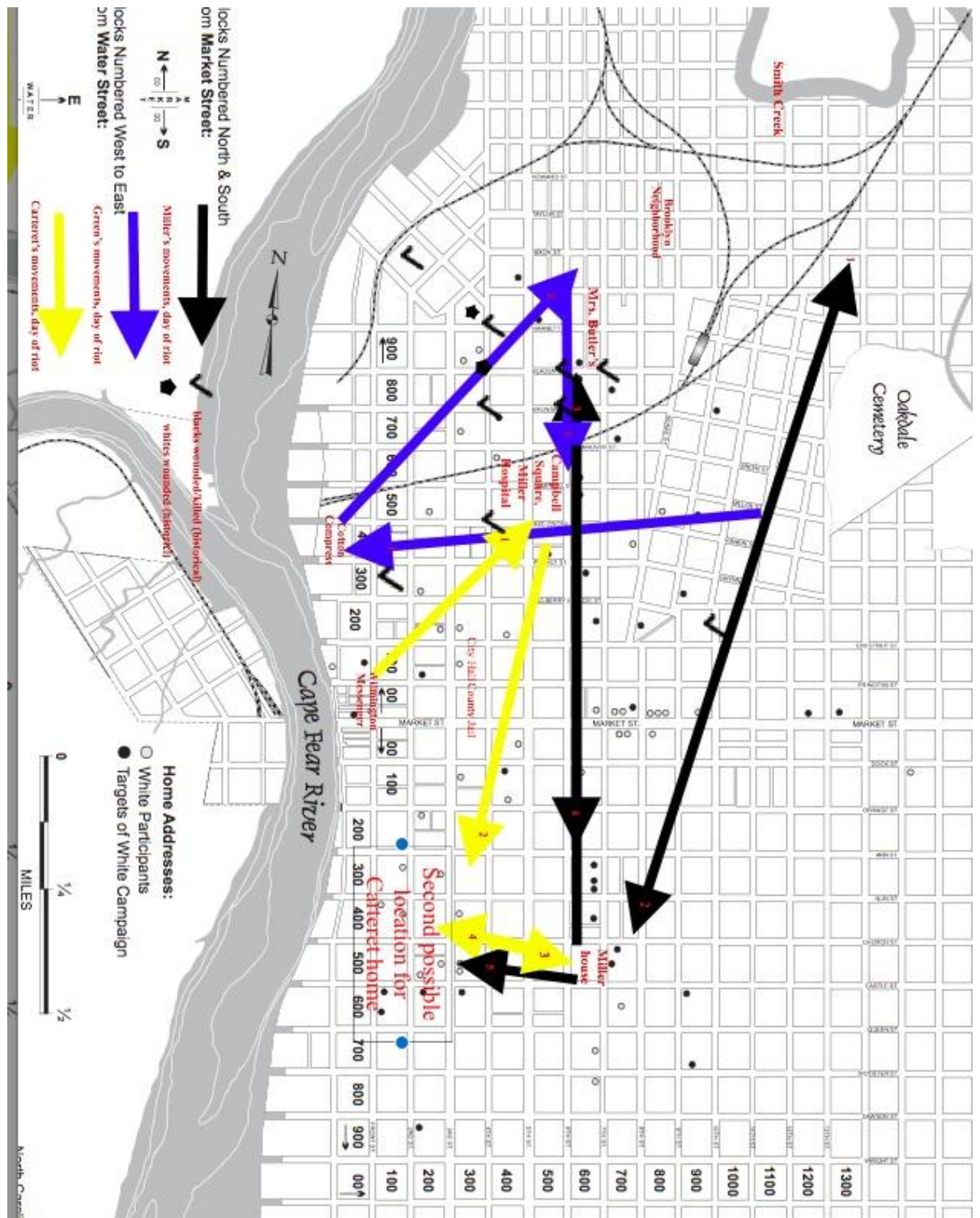


Figure 7: “Homes of Key Participants” (Edited II)

Source: 1898 Wilmington Riot Commission, Chapter 4.

Miller does not start this day in the city. He “had received a call, about one o’clock, to attend a case at the house of a well-to-do colored farmer, who lived some three or four miles from the town” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 165). Chesnutt clarifies that Miller travels the same road as he did during a prior emergency: when he heads to Mr. Delamere’s old plantation to warn him that his servant, Sandy, is in danger of being lynched for a crime he did not commit. “Bellevue,” we learn then, is “ten miles away,” taking “around an hour and a half” to reach in ideal conditions (117). The plantation, which “dated from 1750,” stands “[a]long the bank of the river [Cape Fear],” where “the famous pirate Blackbeard had held high carnival” (118). There were colonial-era plantations along the Lower Cape Fear, southwest of the city (fig. 6), and the Northeast Cape Fear to the northeast (fig. 7).

On his way back from his house visit, Miller intersects with black citizens of Wellington who are fleeing to the “swamps” (166). Historically, people fled north to Oakdale Cemetery and the swamps along Smith Creek or down to the western shores of the Cape Fear and possibly over to the swampy morass of Eagles Island across the river. If Miller had gone on the Lower Cape Fear that day (fig. 6), he would have met people along the banks of the Cape Fear; if he had come from the Northeast Cape Fear, he would have found them in the forests and swamps near Oakdale Cemetery (fig. 7). “As he neared the town,” Miller

saw ahead of him half a dozen men and women approaching, with fear written in their faces . . . looking behind now and then as if pursued by some deadly enemy. At sight of Miller’s buggy they made a dash for cover, disappearing, like a covey of frightened partridges, in the underbrush along the road. (165)

Whatever identity one held in town before, during the riot it is friend versus enemy, “the whites against the negroes” (177). Miller’s buggy gives off the sign of an approaching enemy. Almost immediately, though, Miller is recognized, aligning him with black Wellington. When

Miller saw these men and women scampering into the bushes, he divined, with this slumbering race consciousness which years of culture had not obliterated, that there was some race trouble on foot. His intuition did not long remain unsupported. A

black head was cautiously protruded from the shrubbery, and a black voice—if such a description be allowable—addressed him:—

“Is dat you, Doctuh Miller? . . . “[A]ll hell’s broke loose in town yonduh. De w’ite folks is riz ’gins’ de niggers, an’ say dey ’re gwine ter kill eve’y nigger dey kin lay han’s on” (166)

An anonymous “black voice” speaks back from the literal and symbolic swamp to which the black community has fled. This statement troubles the white supremacist account of order restored from a state of disorder brought on by black economic and political success in Wilmington: “all hell’s broke loose” because the whites have risen against the blacks.

While reversing the hegemonic white supremacist narrative is a central part of Chesnutt’s counter-representation of the riot, he troubles Miller’s mutual recognition of the “black voice” in the swamps, paralleling the situation we found on the train. The next person Miller meets is his friend Watson, a black lawyer who has been ordered out of town:

The white people are up in arms. They have disarmed the colored people, killing half a dozen in the process, and wounding as many more. They have forced the mayor and aldermen to resign, have formed a provisional city government *a la française*, and have ordered me and a half a dozen other fellows to leave town in forty-eight hours, under pain of sudden death . . . I don’t imagine they mean you any harm, personally, because you tread on nobody’s toes . . . (167)

Watson’s account, which closely follows the Wilmington riot, explicitly aligns the black middle class with the undifferentiated black voices hiding in the swamps—they are all “exiled wanderer[s]” (168). Miller is carefully distinguished from them because he wants to return to the city to find his wife and child. While this opens the possibility of countering not just the white supremacist narrative about the riot but also the real/desired spatial movements on that day, Watson suggests that Miller might be *accepted* in the post-riot city.

Before this, Chesnutt had shown the white supremacists’ debate over Miller’s fate. While McBane wants to “run him out with the rest,” his co-conspirators make the case for him to stay (151). Carteret’s defense of Miller turns on the liberal-capitalist argument that the personal and the political should be kept separate: “if I consulted my own inclinations, [I]

would say expel him with the rest; but my grievance is a personal one, and to gratify it in that way would be a loss to the community” (151). Like Miller and the naïve liberals, Carteret wants to maintain the public/private distinction. While the doctrine he espouses yields race warfare, Carteret is made uncomfortable by McBane’s “brutal characterization of their motives”: “It robbed the enterprise of all its poetry, and put a solemn act of revolution upon the plane of a mere vulgar theft of power” (151). Miller becomes distanced from “the people” just as Carteret starts to distinguish himself from “[t]he baser elements of the white population” (181). Or better, Miller and Carteret become more aligned with each other based on their common desire to separate the personal and the political.

Indeed, both men focus on protecting their families from the riot. Carteret has a leg up, since he planned the “political demonstration,” and warns Olivia to stay home (163). Miller hurries home to check on his wife and child. He finds his house empty and begins a journey across the city to a friend’s house, where Janet and the child may be:

The distance across the city to the home of the Mrs. Butler whom his wife had gone to visit was exactly one mile. Though Miller had a good horse in front of him, he was two hours in reaching his destination. Never will the picture of that ride fade from his memory. In his dreams he repeats it night after night, and sees the sights that wounded his eyes, and feels the thoughts—the haunting spirits of the thoughts—that tore his heart as he rode through hell to find those whom he was seeking. (171)⁴⁵

The riot wounds the eyes and haunts the mind, making representation impossible. A body in the street alludes, almost metaphorically, to this antagonistic violence through “what it signified” (171). Such bodily signs become mere background as Miller rides on:

Every professional instinct urged him to stop and offer aid to the sufferer; but the uncertainty concerning his wife and child proved a stronger motive and urged him resistlessly forward. Here and there the ominous sounds of firearms was audible. He might have thought this merely part of the show, like the “powder play” of the Arabs, but for the bloody confirmation of its earnestness which had already assailed his vision. (173)

⁴⁵ If Mrs. Butler lives a mile away, this likely put her in Brooklyn, the black neighborhood. See fig. 6 and fig. 7.

After Carteret returns home he finds that Dodie has a medical emergency that his “revolution” has made hard to remedy: his wife has called Dr. Price, but he is out of town with the expectation “of some kind of trouble in town today,” after which the phone lines were cut, “the servants were gone, and the nurse was afraid to venture out into the street” (185). Carteret heads out in search of doctors, his movements echoing Miller’s:

Far down the street he could see the glow of the burning hospital, and he had scarcely left his own house when [a] fusillade of shots . . . was audible. Carteret would have hastened back to the scene of the riot, to see what was now going on, and to make another effort to stem the tide of bloodshed; but before the dread of losing his child, all other interests fell into the background. (187)

While the light of the burning hospital and the sound of gunshots are relegated to the background during Miller and Carteret’s searches, Chesnutt forces his readers to confront this scene of violence head-on when he turns to Green’s riot experiences. Chapter XXXV turns to Green and his defensive battle against the white supremacist mob at the hospital. The violent climax of this sequence is Green’s revenge against McBane: “Armed with a huge bowie-knife, a relic of the civil war, . . . [Green] dashed through the mob, which parted instinctively before him, and . . . Captain McBane . . . stood waiting to meet him. A pistol-flame flashed in his face, but he went on, and . . . buried his knife to the hilt in the heart of the enemy” (184). Antagonistic violence, which pits Green against his “enemy” in a battle to the death, is self-cancelling—a political and representational zero. As the Civil War knife indicates, it is a “tragedy” that repeats itself but never ends (184).

Critics are often stuck choosing between Miller and Green as Chesnutt’s avatars. Is it best to make a home for oneself amidst the backdrop of race antagonism in the hopes that, with your example, the future can become a better place? Or is it better to meet the armed defense of white equality and autonomy with the armed defense of black equality and autonomy? Both options reinsert the black body into the city, frustrating the dream of a

return to white order. However, this binary ignores the third option held up by Janet. Or, to stay with character pairings, the focus on Miller/Carteret and Green/McBane elides the import of the sisterly recognition between Janet and Olivia, which bookends the novel.

The last two chapters take place in the Miller's house. Miller has found his wife kneeling over their child's dead body in the streets and they have carried him home. Meanwhile, out of other options, "Carteret dashed out of the yard and ran rapidly to Miller's house; ordinarily a walk of six or seven minutes, Carteret covered it in three" (189). Miller refuses to care for Dodie, showing Carteret "a specimen of your handiwork" (his dead child) (190). Carteret views "Miller's refusal to go with him [as] pure, elemental justice": "He was indeed conscious of a certain involuntary admiration for a man who held in his hands the power of life and death, and could use it, with strict justice, to avenge his own wrongs. In Miller's place he would have done the same thing" (190-191). If the self-erasing violence of McBane and Green is undesirable, this moment appears to stand out as a viable alternative. Yet, these are Miller's "own wrongs" and Carteret hears them as a father rather than as an adversary (191). The moment is private, speaking to an element of the realist novel that is as pervasive as it is problematic: agonistic dialogue is in the foreground while the world burns.

On both a formal and political level Chesnutt knows the novel cannot end with this "narrow" or "logical" application of justice (190). Wai Chee Dimock has argued that there is always a "residue" in liberal accounts of justice that the novel, as genre, is uniquely able to capture. The residue in *Marrow* takes the form of the final chapter, "The Sisters." When Carteret returns home without Miller, Olivia decides to go beg for mercy. Miller is now moved, like Carteret, by family connection. Wisely, he leaves his decision to Janet.

Chesnutt's description of the sisters' first face-to-face meeting is remarkable:

The two women stood confronting each other across the body of the dead child, mute witness of this first meeting between two children of the same father. Standing

thus face to face, each under the stress of the deepest emotions, the resemblance between them was even more striking than [before]. But Death, the great leveler, striking upon the one hand and threatening upon the other, had wrought a marvelous transformation in the bearing of the two women. The sad-eyed Janet towered erect, with menacing aspect, like an avenging goddess. The other, whose pride had been her life, stood in the attitude of a trembling suppliant. (*Marrow* 193)

Miller and Carteret had both accepted the mute victim(s) of the riot as the sign of a race antagonism that had gone too far (into private life). Now the body is a “mute witness” to the sisters standing face to face. This a re-conception of antagonism rooted in recognition.

On one level, recognition occurs when Olivia calls Janet “my lawful sister” (194). “This, then, was the recognition for which, all her life, she had longed in secret,” but Janet understands the problem with it now: “it had come, not with frank kindness and sisterly love, but in a storm of blood and tears; not freely given, from an open heart, but extorted from a reluctant conscience by the agony of a mother’s fears” (194-195). In the novel’s climatic speech, Janet abruptly switches gears from the personal to the political:

“Listen!” she cried, dashing her tears aside. “I have but one word for you,—one last word,—and then I hope never to see your face again! My mother died of want, and I was brought up by the hands of charity. Now, when I have married a man who can supply my needs, you offer me back the money which you and your friends have robbed me of! You imagined that the shame of being a negro swallowed up every other ignominy,—and in your eyes I am a negro, though I am your sister, and you are white, and people have taken me for you on the streets,—and you, therefore, left me nameless all my life! . . . For twenty-five years I, poor, despicable fool, would have kissed your feet for a word, a nod, a smile. Now, when this tardy recognition comes, for which I have waited so long, it is tainted with fraud and crime and blood, and I must pay for it with my child’s life! . . . I throw you back your father’s name, your father’s wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them,—they are bought too dear! . . . But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have your child’s life, if my husband can save it!” (195)

Janet confirms what Olivia feared—people misrecognize her as Olivia on the streets—and the fear behind the fear: they are no different. As Olivia intuited, Janet has been morally wronged with all (ex-)slaves and she must open herself and the (ex-)masters to critique.

The speech centers on the ways in which Janet has been “fouly wronged.” Janet speaks first about the wrongs Olivia and her “friends” have done to Janet and her mother. But she works from this particular set of wrongs to a broader one: “you . . . left me nameless all my life!” “Whoever is nameless *cannot* speak,” Rancière writes: “They do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of logos—meaning, of symbolic enrollment in the city” (*Disagreement* 23). When they do speak, it is to name the “wrong” done when any group excludes any other from the community of speaking beings. To arrive at a similar point, Janet “throw[s] [Olivia] back” identities by which Olivia could recognize her and still maintain her worldview. Then she gives her lesson: “But that you may know that a woman may be fouly wronged” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 195). Woman signifies both herself and anybody whatsoever, making it the universal signifier for “human being” in place of the more common (and exclusionary) “man.” Olivia must recognize the wrong of rendering a human being nameless and banishing her to the literal and symbolic swamps outside civilized life. Janet is not alone in this shadowy no-place—not anymore. As the citizens of Wellington lose their assigned names, places, and roles they also become the nameless, stateless many.⁴⁶

Janet’s speech is antagonistic because the identification with the nameless and the declaration of the equality threaten the hierarchical order that had banished them as unequal. Such is Rancière’s conception of politics. The aesthetic component is the reconfiguration of the sensible by this new subject, typically in what had been a private/apolitical space and by beings that had once uttered sheer noise. While this would seem to line up nicely with Janet’s speech, the radical-democratic statement of a wrong is not something literature accomplishes in Rancière’s account. Literature has its own forms of equality: the equality of subjects; the

⁴⁶ Many counter-narratives of the massacre were delivered in unsigned letters. One letter sent to President McKinley by “a Negro woman of this city” forcefully asks: “are we to die like rats in a trap? With no place to seek redress or to go with our grievances? Can we call on any other Nation for help?” (qtd. in Hossfield 44-45).

mute speech of bodies and objects, deciphered by the author; and the molecular equality of things. Wharton moved from the second to the third option but ultimately wanted to avoid a direct political message. I ended the last chapter by speculating whether her readers would have been moved to political action *because of* her representation of anachronistic love. Chesnutt weaves the aesthetic and the political so tightly that it is not enough to say that literature does something akin to politics by producing mute speech or that its re-configuration of the sensible prepares the ground for political action. Furthermore, unlike Wharton Chesnutt accomplishes a representation of antagonistic, radical-democratic politics while remaining within the context of realism.

Everything hinges on the connection between Janet's desire for recognition and Chesnutt's sense that the novel should prepare readers for "social recognition and equality" (*Journals* 140). In the first face-to-face meeting between sisters, the child's body is a "mute witness" (139) of Olivia's recognition of a speaking being—a political animal—where there was once the noise of a threat (for instance, Janet's cry to save Dodie's life had been "a mother's instinct," a reflex) (67). The mute speech of death and the antagonism of which it speaks (to those who know how to interpret its signs), become the living, breathing antagonism of a political speech founded in identification with the nameless and the confirmation of equality. Rancière reserves the term *demos* for any part(y) that is excessive to the police order and hence whose presence antagonizes the police. Janet "plays the part of the demos" and confirms their equality qua human beings who can articulate a wrong (Rancière, "Should Democracy Come?" 278). Janet's appearance as a speaking being, in a novel where she had been relegated to the margins as a threat, is a *representation* of radical-democratic politics, while her "catalogue of wrong and outrage" is an example of Mouffe's agonistic politics (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 160). Antagonism and agonism emerge on the same

stage, which lasts as long as Olivia listens (“Stay—do not go yet! . . . I have not done”) (195). This speech thus brings the stage of politics into existence in a private home in what had been a private recognition scene: the personal is the political; the private is the public.

Janet’s status as a mulatta places her in a great position to play the role of the *demos* and deliver the agonistic “catalogue of wrong.” The mulatta is an excessive, neither/nor identity that both exposes and conceals the violence of a socio-spatial system founded on racial hierarchy. She also evokes the American identity “to come,” where the promise of absolute human equality is confirmed in the body, not as the presence of two races but as the absence of any difference. Radical-democratic aesthetics and/as antagonistic politics brings all this onto a single plane, a single stage: the injuries done by a hierarchical system, told from the point of view of the excluded voice/body, and the promises of a democracy “to come” arriving in the here-and-now. The key is that both the catalogue of wrongs and the confirmation of equality are seen and heard by a spectator who once tried to ignore a pure threat. If this can be deemed recognition, it stretches the typical meaning: far from recognizing an already-existing identity, Olivia is seeing and hearing Janet speak *for the first time* as a fellow human being, an equal, someone capable of articulating a wrong.⁴⁷

Where Janet once waited for a kind word or smile from Olivia, Olivia now waits for Janet’s decision as a “suppliant” before “an avenging goddess” (193). The point is not that this is a new, permanent inequality but that the previous one has been reversed, imperiling Olivia’s identity and disrupting the socio-spatial “codes” the reader had learned. Janet decides that Dodie should be saved, if possible, because his life is as worthy as anyone else’s—to decide otherwise would undermine the point of her speech.

⁴⁷ See Honneth and Rancière 90-95.

This moment represents the radical confirmation of realism's aesthetic and political aims, as Chesnutt and the rest of the authors in this study envisioned them. First, it is borne of a plausible but contingent web of actions and counter-actions that have been traced against the backdrop of race antagonism in a city on the Atlantic seaboard. If it strikes us as less probable than the moments that brought it about, this is because Chesnutt is attempting to reach that third gear of realist representation where "the people"—those who have been left voiceless and nameless in the background—antagonistically emerge onto the plane of characterological debate. This leads to the second point: Janet speaks as and for "the people," which does not only signal the black citizens of Wilmington/Wellington on November 10, 1898 but *anybody* who has been excluded and rendered nameless. In Rancière's words, she "link[s] a peculiar wrong done to a peculiar group with the wrong done to anyone by the police distribution—the police denial of the capacity of anyone" ("Should" 278). In other words, this moment is both particular and universal in the way the best realist novels are. Finally, it confirms a radical presupposition that there is no difference between the sisters that would justify Janet's wrongs or Dodie's death.

In his understanding of the political work of the realist novel, Chesnutt stands alone and *Marrow* is the realist novel *par excellence*. It is the "province of literature" to represent the antagonistic appearance of "social recognition and equality" where there was once a vague threat and inequality (Chesnutt, *Journals* 140). But it is up to Chesnutt's readers to make changes in the direction of black civil rights. To do so, readers must walk back from the universal (the equality of all human beings) to the particular (the inequalities of the Jim Crow South), awakening a feeling of injustice: this specific group in this specific time and place has been unjustly left outside the foundational promises of liberal-democratic society as well as the vision of the world "to come."

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- . "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology." *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2012, pp. 1-33.
- . *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 1989. Verso, 2008.
- . *Living in the End Times*. Verso, 2010.

Curriculum Vitae

John Sampson
(b. 1987 in Urbana, Illinois)

EDUCATION

Ph.D., English Literature, Johns Hopkins University, June 2018.

M.A. English Literature, Johns Hopkins University, 2014.
Field Examinations: American (16th to 20th century) and 19th-century British.

B.A. English, Kenyon College, 2010, *summa cum laude*.
Undergraduate Thesis: "Purification and Survival: A Study of Order and Disorder in *The Coral Island*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Beetle*." Awarded High Honors.

University of Exeter (UK), 2008-2009.
Undergraduate year abroad.

DISSERTATION

"The Agony of Democracy: Antagonism and Urban Life in the American Realist Novel."
Advisors: Eric Sundquist and Jared Hickman.

TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

19th and 20th-century American literature and culture; literary realism; urban history; political theory; film and film theory.

PUBLICATIONS

"'A Catalogue of Wrong and Outrage': Undermining White Supremacist Discourse and Spatial Practice in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*," *American Literary Realism* 50.3 (Spring 2018), pp. 189-213.

"The Re-Formation of Urban Space in *The Bostonians*," *The Henry James Review* 37.2 (Spring 2016), pp. 154-173.

CONFERENCE PAPERS

"Will and Walt: Urbanism, Democracy, Aesthetics," American Literature Association, 2018.

“The Aesthetics and Politics of Anachronism in *The Age of Innocence*,” Journal Club Talk, Johns Hopkins, 2016.

“Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and a Democracy to Come,” Wharton in Washington, 2016.

“‘Feeling like Populace’: Public Transportation and the Doctrine of Complicity in Howellsian Realism,” American Literature Association, 2015.

“Architecture and Ideology in *The American Scene*,” Midwestern Modern Language Association, 2014.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Sole Instructor, Department of English, Johns Hopkins

“Re-Writing Democracy in America, 1865-1920,” Spring 2017 (4.8 overall instructor rating).

Sole Instructor, Expository Writing Program, Johns Hopkins

“The Ethics of Spying and Surveillance in Film,” Spring 2018, Fall 2017 (5.0 rating).

“Film as Voyeurism,” Fall 2015, Spring 2016.

“Baltimore Stories and the Power of Place,” Fall 2013, Spring 2014.

Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Johns Hopkins

“American Literature to 1865,” Fall 2012, Fall 2016;

“Ethnic American Literature,” Spring 2013.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Johns Hopkins University Writing Center

Shift Director, 2015-2017/18. Manage shifts, assign students to tutors, answer phone calls/e-mails.

Tutor, Fall and Spring 2014.

Johns Hopkins Department of English

Research Assistant, 2012. Located and e-mailed hundreds of articles for Professor Mark Thompson, many of which were in German and French journals.

NON-ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

The New York Foundling, 2011

Resource Specialist and Social Media Coordinator. Worked with families to find after-school resources and activities for at-risk youth; maintained a blog and general

social media presence for The New York Foundling, a non-profit organization founded and sponsored by the Sisters of Charity.

FELLOWSHIPS AND ACADEMIC AWARDS

Dean's Teaching Fellowship, Johns Hopkins, 2017.

Phi Beta Kappa, Kenyon College 2010.

summa cum laude, Kenyon College, 2010.

High Honors in English, Kenyon College, 2010.

Dean's List, Kenyon College 2006-2010.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Edith Wharton Society, William Dean Howells Society, Midwestern Modern Literature Association.